



*The*  
**Birds and Wildlife**  
*of*  
**Paxton Pits**



# The Birds and Wildlife of Paxton Pits

including Little Paxton village and surrounding area

1<sup>st</sup> September 2005 to 31<sup>st</sup> August 2006

*Sightings edited by Julian Hughes and Mark Ward*

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

Paxton Pits is a complex of former and current 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 Natural England. 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 Visitors' Centre run by volunteers, where information and refreshments at weekends and on many weekdays. The northern pits form Little Paxton Quarry, managed by Bardon Aggregates; 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.

### **Cover designed by Ian Johnston**

*Principal photograph: long-eared owl (Martin Davis)*

One of three long-eared owls found roosting on farmland adjacent to the Pits in early March, the birds stayed until at least the end of April, and one was found nearby in early June. A scarce visitor to the Pits, this was a welcome visitor for local birders.

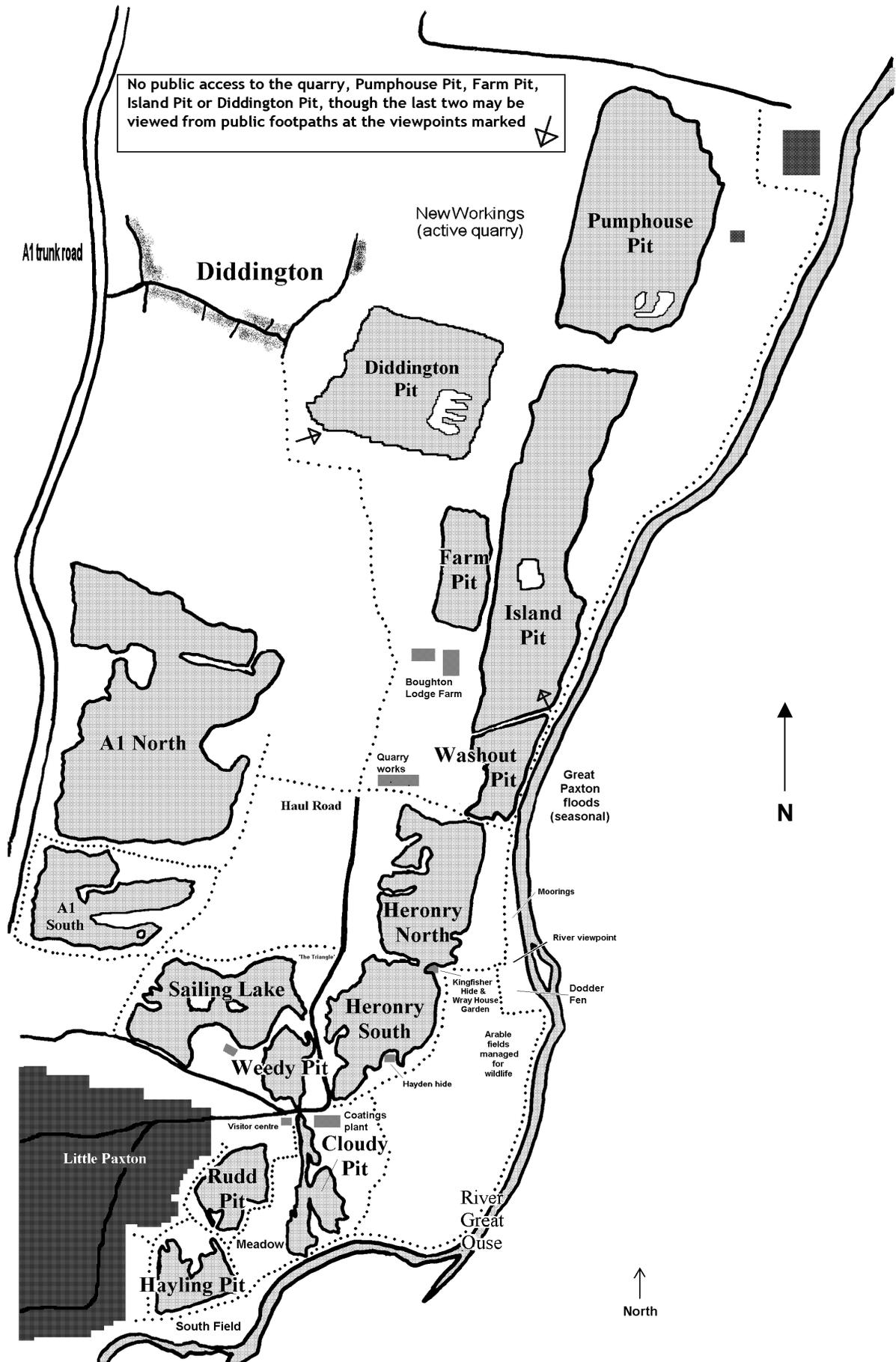
Inset photographs (left to right)

**Comma** (*Ian Johnston*): one of the scarcer regular butterflies at Paxton, this delicate species can be seen throughout the spring and summer

**Great northern diver** (*Stuart Elsom, www.stuartelsom.co.uk*): this well-watched bird stayed on Diddington Pit for a month from late November, before moving to Grafham Water where it stayed until May

**Migrant hawk** (*Paul Rule*): though once a migrant, this late summer dragonfly is now resident at Paxton

**Fox** (*Ian Johnston*): judging by the numbers seen, there are several earths around Paxton Pits



## Foreword

**Julian Hughes, co-editor**

Watching wildlife at Paxton Pits is rewarding because things are constantly changing. The seasons, of course, bring change: the cormorants building their nests early in January, the much-heralded return of the first nightingales in April, the noisy common terns demanding food in July and the arrival of large flocks of pochards and tufted ducks in autumn that are a harbinger of colder times. The benchmarks by which we can measure that the heartbeat of nature is beating properly.

But the habitat in which these birds live at Paxton is also changing. By its nature, the sand and gravel quarrying industry here has turned arable fields into bare, open basins which nature starts to reclaim as soon as the diggers have gone. This can be an exciting time: these ephemeral habitats attract breeding birds such as little ringed plovers and sand martins, migrant waders seek a food stop on the long haul to the Arctic, and the shallow, vegetated pools are full of insect larvae for a year or two before the predators catch up. Later, the basins fill and the banks mature with reeds and grass, then scrub and willows, home to birds, mammals and butterflies. To illustrate how good a temporary habitat can be, the report on page 55 shows how draining the water for quarrying operations proved excellent for passage waders.

At Paxton Pits, we're fortunate to have had the full range of these habitats during the last 30 years. And that looks set to continue with the welcome news that planning authorities support an extension of quarrying at Little Paxton. This will bring most of the existing wetland into the nature reserve and create new habitats, such as reedbed and wet grassland. It also means that there will be several more decades of change: bare ground, shallow water and sand banks and mud. Wildlife will love it, and so will visitors, for it will mean that over the coming years many 'restricted access' areas will be opened up for people to enjoy. Find out more on page 52.

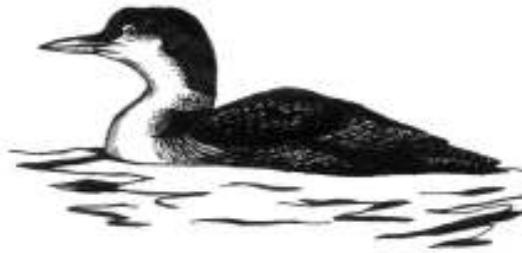
Other change is also designed for wildlife. Land along the river that was cropped intensively for decades is now managed for wildlife by Huntingdonshire District Council. The results on the arable fields, in the form of more insects, skylarks, grey partridges and yellowhammers, are already evident. The next phase, creating water meadows, is underway and should bring further benefits for wildlife.

One other change is evident from the cover of this report. As well as the attractive colour cover, you may have noticed that *Birds and Wildlife of Paxton Pits* is now produced by The Friends of Paxton Pits. Sadly, the St Neots Bird and Wildlife Club - which produced the report since its inception since 1994 - folded early in 2006. The Friends have inherited the responsibility for this report, and any profits will contribute to the management of the nature reserve. We have taken the opportunity to expand the space devoted to records of wildlife other than birds, which are increasing thanks to renewed interest in plants and invertebrates around the nature reserve, and I'd like to thank Mark Ward for taking on the job of editing this section.

Change can sometimes be difficult, but I think the changes at Paxton Pits are very exciting. I hope that you will get to the Pits and experience them for yourself.

## The Year in View

*Autumn and winter:* migrants and vagrants always help to spice up wildlife watching at Paxton, and although autumn 2005 was not a classic, an **Arctic skua** in September was a highlight, and a new addition to the Paxton bird list. Three autumn **common scoters**, a **Slavonian grebe** and a **goshawk** were the only other notable records of the period. A mild autumn encouraged insects on the wing well into November, with **red admiral**, **common darter**, **small tortoiseshell** and **peacock** during the month.



Great northern diver (Rob Banbury)

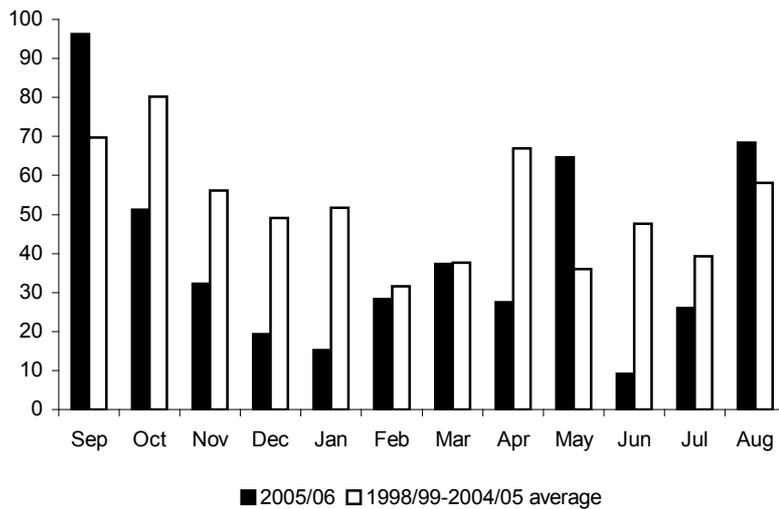
Winter brought not one **bittern** but two, with records from early November to late March, many visitors getting great views on Washout Pit. Two **water pipits** also stayed for the winter. A **great northern diver** drew the crowds for its month-long stay in December, with the bonus of a **black-throated diver** for one afternoon. Another new bird for Paxton came in December with two records of **hawfinch**, part of a UK-wide influx from the east. **Otter** sightings were regular from December to March, with four together in January and some great photographs taken in February.

The remainder of the winter was rather uneventful however, aside from a **waxwing** reported in January and a flock of **white-fronted geese** that was almost certainly of wild origin. An exciting discovery was a roost of **long-eared owls** that provided great photo opportunities. **Snowdrops** and **common frogs** in February and a **harvest mouse** emerged from torpor briefly, but spring was a long time coming.

*Spring and summer:* the **cormorant** roost peaked much later than usual, hitting 589 in early March, the highest count here since 1997. Low water levels in some of the northern pits, a result of a very dry winter and latterly due to pumping operations in the quarry, provided good conditions for early migrants, such as a peak of 23 **pintails** in March (the most since 1993), up to 159 **white wagtails** through April and 195 **arctic terns** late in the month, including 136 on a single day. It was also a good spring for **kittiwakes**, making it the best year since 1988. A **goosander** on 30<sup>th</sup> April was the latest ever, appearing long after the wintering flock had headed north.

However, it is for the wader migration that spring and late summer 2006 will be particularly remembered. A remarkable 28 species were recorded, including 4 **avocets**, 18 **grey plovers**, 12 **knots**, 55 **sanderlings**, 7 **little stints**, a **temminck's stint**, 154 **black-tailed godwits**, 38 **bar-tailed godwits**, 50 **ruffs** (unlike the other waders, almost all were in the autumn), 41 **whimbrels**, 10 **spotted redshanks**, 8 **wood sandpipers** and 31 **turnstones**. Late summer brought peak counts of 21 **greenshanks** and **green sandpipers**, and 15 **common sandpipers**.

Three **ravens** in May and June make this an almost annual visitor, but the red-letter day was 3<sup>rd</sup> June when a **roseate tern** became the third new species to be added to the Paxton list during the 12 months, and a **golden oriole** flew over the car park.



*Monthly rainfall at Paxton Pits, courtesy of The Environment Agency*

### The weather year

- *a cold, dry winter* – rainfall was below the recent average in every month.
- *a cool, wet spring* – the average March temperature was less than 5°C, but May was one of the few months with above average rain.
- *a hot, dry summer* – July was the hottest ever, though August was the dullest for 30 years.

The hot summer made it a great year for insects. It was a superb year for migrants, particularly **silver-Y** and **hummingbird hawkmoths** and **painted lady** butterflies. Several **red-veined darters** were found, a first for the Pits, while **small red-eyed damselflies** consolidated their presence on Cloudy Pit. The first ever **silver-washed fritillary** was one of several locally. Night-time moth trapping added several species to the Pits' list, including **ruddy carpet**, only the third record for Huntingdonshire.

**Bird breeding:** it was not a great year for breeding waterbirds, with low numbers of breeding pairs of **mute swan** and poor productivity among **great-crested grebes**. **Oystercatcher**, **lapwing** and **redshank** all bred successfully, but only a few pairs of each were present. **Black-headed gulls** and **common terns** both did well, with **herring gulls** and **lesser black-backed gulls** breeding for a second year. 163 pairs of **cormorants** nested, a slight fall on 2005, but 8-10 **grey heron** nests was the best count since 1999. A record 384 pairs of **sand martins** nested around the quarry and songbirds also did well: 28 male **nightingales** held territory, there were 99 singing **sedgeworkers** and 11 pairs of **lesser whitethroats**, while 2-3 pairs of **meadow pipits** bred. By contrast, **chiffchaff** numbers were noticeably down.

**Peregrine** and **wigeon** were two unusual species to overwinter, the latter for the third consecutive year. Post-breeding dispersal from other areas brought record numbers of **yellow-legged gulls** (60) and **little egrets** (14) to the Pits, with regular roosting of the latter on Heronry South, and a **nuthatch** to Sailing Lake. Aside from the waders, early autumn migration was quiet, save for a **pie flycatcher** in August.

### **Bird monitoring**

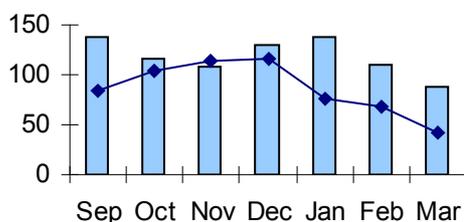
Two surveys form the backbone of bird monitoring. Waterfowl counts are conducted every month of the winter for the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS), run by the British Trust for Ornithology, Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, RSPB and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee. Estimates of breeding numbers come from the Paxton Breeding Bird Survey (PBBS), co-ordinated counts of the pits complex in May and June. In addition, the cormorant roost is counted at dusk, usually once each week, from early October until early March. The WeBS and the PBBS monitoring cover the entire pits complex, including the quarry. In addition, a small number of volunteers are granted access to the private quarry and the adjacent pits as part of the BTO Business Bird Challenge.

## The Birds of Paxton Pits

### Mute swan

#### Resident

The winter count peaked at 139 in January, staying higher than the average throughout the remainder of the winter.



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

Mute swans are very territorial, so breeding numbers are limited by the number of pits. There were 11 nests this year, fledging at least 19 young. This represents poor breeding success with 3 nests failing completely, although at least two pairs may have re-nested, as small young were seen on the river and on Heronry South in late July. Mute swans also hold territories on the river, with a nest every mile between Little Paxton and Godmanchester (BP).

A non-breeding flock peaked at 71 in mid June, but did not remain together to moult as usual.

### Bewick's swan

#### Scarce winter visitor

Just six were seen, on five dates between 1<sup>st</sup> November and 4<sup>th</sup> January.

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### Whooper swan

#### Scarce winter visitor

Four individuals: two on 10<sup>th</sup> October and singles on 17<sup>th</sup> October and 29<sup>th</sup> December (the last with a Bewick's swan).

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### Pink-footed goose

#### Rare winter visitor, but most records believed to be naturalised birds

One, on 9<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> October, was the only record of the year, and might perhaps have been a wild bird.

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### White-fronted goose

#### Scarce winter visitor, but most records believed to be naturalised birds

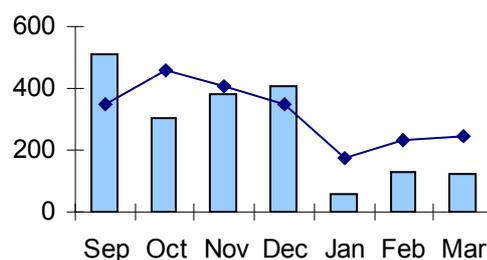
A flock of presumed wild birds was present from 10<sup>th</sup> February to 9<sup>th</sup> March. It started with 10 birds (MD/JS) but peaked at 17 on 1<sup>st</sup> March (DM/JM). They proved to be mobile and quite skittish, but spent several days on Heronry South and Sailing Lake. These are the first wild birds at Paxton since 1996, and the first to stay since 1982-83. Otherwise, a single on 31<sup>st</sup> December (RES) and three reported on 4<sup>th</sup> April were of unknown origin.

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### Greylag goose

#### Resident (re-established)

Numbers were below average through the winter; the season's peak of 530 on 12<sup>th</sup> October was not on a WeBS count (JLFP).



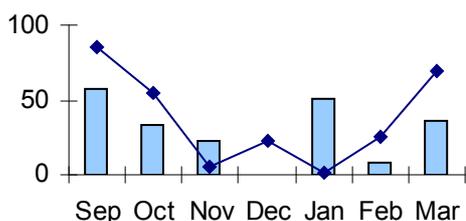
#### Wintering greylag geese during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits

Nests were built on Sailing Lake and Island Pit from early April. Up to 168 juveniles were seen in mid-May, although only around 100 reached full size in mid June, fewer than in recent years. The late summer count peaked at 490 on 3<sup>rd</sup> August (JLFP).

## Canada goose

### Resident (introduced)

The WeBS count of 51 birds in January was unusual for the midwinter, when Canada geese are usually scarce at Paxton. However, the highest count (JLFP) – of 82 on 1<sup>st</sup> November – was not from WeBS, which illustrates that the surveys can only provide a snapshot. Up to four Canada x greylag goose hybrids were seen between 13<sup>th</sup> November and 6<sup>th</sup> June, most usually around Sailing Lake during the spring.



Current year — Five year average

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

Canada geese nested on Cloudy Pit, Sailing Lake, A1 North and Island Pit. At least 10 broods were seen, with 34 young fledging, the lowest breeding success for some years.

## Barnacle goose

### Resident (naturalised)

Up to five were present with greylag geese through the winter and two remained through the summer. A flock of 10 on two dates in early May is presumed to have been from Roxton in north Bedfordshire, where numbers have passed 300 birds.



Two barnacle x Canada goose hybrids were seen on 7<sup>th</sup> October and a single on 7<sup>th</sup> November (JLFP) but it is not known whether these hatched at Paxton.

## Egyptian goose

### Occasional visitor (naturalised)

A flock of four, flying south on 15<sup>th</sup> January (MD/JH/NP) was the only record of the year, and the first since July 2003.

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## Common shelduck

### Occasional breeder

For the second consecutive year, shelducks were seen throughout the winter, from 6<sup>th</sup> November. Typically up to seven birds were seen, but numbers increased from early March and peaked at 25 on 3<sup>rd</sup> April (JLFP), the highest count we're aware of.

The quarry was well suited to breeding shelducks, with exposed sandbanks and cliffs suitable for burrowing. Although numbers remained high well into June (e.g. 18 on 3<sup>rd</sup>, JLFP) and several pairs formed, there was no evidence of breeding. It's now five years since that happened. Usually absent after July, up to three juveniles remained through August.

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## Mandarin

### Rare visitor (introduced)

Still scarce compared to nearby Grafham Water where they bred in 2005. After two males on the Heronry Pits on 9<sup>th</sup> October, a single male was present from 10<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup>, from 11<sup>th</sup> December to 2<sup>nd</sup> January and on 12<sup>th</sup> April. A pair was here on 16<sup>th</sup>-24<sup>th</sup> February. Two males were on the northern pits on 9<sup>th</sup> August, one remaining until 21<sup>st</sup>.

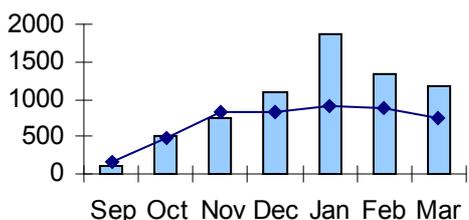
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## Wigeon

### Abundant winter visitor

Numbers were typical through the first half of the winter, with a notable first influx in late September. The January peak, of 1864 birds, was slightly lower than in 2005, but still way above the recent average.

The prolonged winter helped to hold up to a dozen birds into early May and indeed five stayed throughout the month.



Legend: Current year (blue bar), Five year average (blue line with diamond)

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

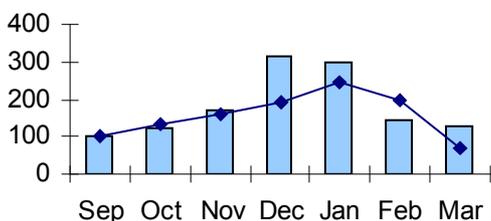
As well as an injured male staying for the third consecutive year, a pair lived on Diddington Pit through June, briefly raising hopes of breeding. Autumn migrants from early July, with nine on 9<sup>th</sup> (JH/NP) though no higher counts before the end of August.

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**Gadwall**

**Abundant in winter, occasional breeder**

The winter peak was 315 on 4<sup>th</sup> December, the highest count for the month since 1980. A gadwall x mallard hybrid was present on 28<sup>th</sup> May (JW).



Legend: Current year (blue bar), Five year average (blue line with diamond)

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

Just a single brood was reported: a female on Diddington Pit fledged two young.

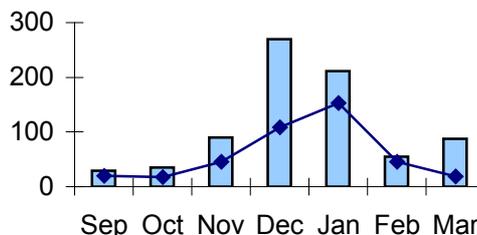
The moulting flock of gadwall has become a summer feature at Paxton in recent years, but in 2006 non-breeding birds were flocking on Pumphouse Pit. As the water level fell, the flock moved to its usual Heronry South haunt, with 150 there on 10<sup>th</sup> July and 200 on 15<sup>th</sup> August (MAW).

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**Teal**

**Abundant winter visitor**

Although not reaching the high count (380) of 2004/05, teal made the most of the shallow water on the drained Pumphouse Pit, peaking at 317 on 18<sup>th</sup> December (JLFP). Unusually, they remained in double figures into May.



Legend: Current year (blue bar), Five year average (blue line with diamond)

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

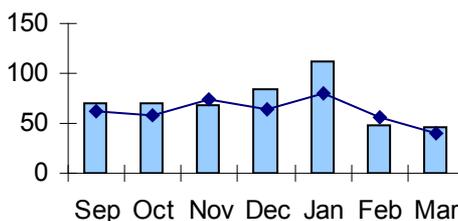
The last of the spring, a pair on 13<sup>th</sup> May (MAW), was less than three weeks before the first of the autumn, on 1<sup>st</sup> June (JLFP), after which numbers increased to 28 by early July and 96 by the end of August.

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**Mallard**

**Resident**

Typical counts for recent years, peaking at 112 on 15<sup>th</sup> January.



Legend: Current year (blue bar), Five year average (blue line with diamond)

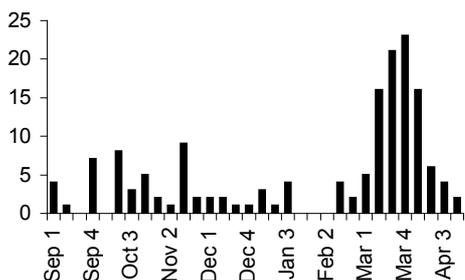
**Wintering mallards during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits**

It was a poor breeding season, with the lowest number of nests and young fledged since our records began more than a decade ago. Seven nests hatched 29 young on four pits, but as few as five birds may have fledged. A midsummer flock of 127 on Pumphouse Pit was notable (NA/MD).



### Pintail

**Annual winter visitor, in small numbers**  
 Shallow water in Pumphouse Pit made this the best pintail winter for many years at Paxton. The first four on 3<sup>rd</sup> September were a precursor to flocks of up to nine prior to Christmas. Northbound migrants dropped into Paxton from mid March, peaking at 23 (12 males) on 24<sup>th</sup> (MD). This was the highest count at Paxton since 73 in January 1993. The last of the winter was on 23<sup>rd</sup> April (GAR), the latest ever Paxton record. First of the autumn was one from 26<sup>th</sup> August into September (JLFP).



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### Garganey

**Scarce spring and autumn migrant**  
 A good autumn 2005, with five birds: a male from 23<sup>rd</sup> August to 8<sup>th</sup> September (JLFP), two juveniles on 12/13<sup>th</sup> September (MD), a juvenile on 2<sup>nd</sup> October and the last on 22<sup>nd</sup> October (both MD/JW), the latest Paxton record since 1991. A sixth garganey was reported on 26<sup>th</sup> September.

The first of spring was a male on 22<sup>nd</sup> April (MLH/JLFP/NP), followed by a minimum of eight during May and early June, though with birds recorded on 13 dates it is difficult to know how many were involved. All were adult males, except for a female paired with a first-summer male on 15<sup>th</sup> May (MAW). The last of the spring was a male on 12<sup>th</sup> June (JLFP).

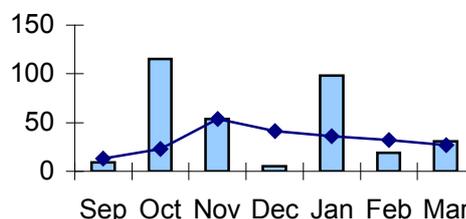
Four in early autumn: a female-type on 25<sup>th</sup> July (JW), a juvenile female from 14<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> August (MD), joined by a second on 17<sup>th</sup> (JLFP), and a female on 31<sup>st</sup> (MAW).

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| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
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### Shoveler

**Common in winter; occasional breeder**

A strange winter, with large numbers in October and January, but otherwise shovelers were sparse. The highest count, of 207, was on 10<sup>th</sup> October (JLFP), but the Pumphouse Pit proved attractive in early spring, with 178 on 31<sup>st</sup> March (JLFP).



Legend:   
 Current year   
 Five year average

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

A pair remained through May, but there was no evidence of breeding as in 2005, and numbers increased slowly through the summer, to 42 by late August.

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### Red crested pochard

**Increasing visitor (introduced) and possible occasional breeder**

A family of three juveniles and a male remained until mid October before leaving Dad behind until Christmas (though three males were seen on 18<sup>th</sup> November, JLFP).

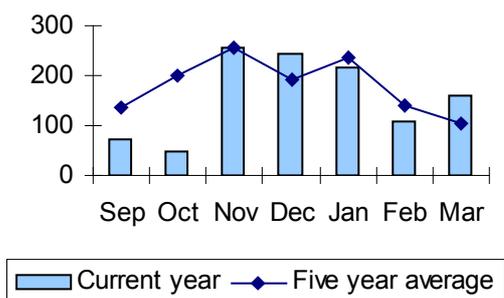
From January to April, up to four males were seen sporadically. These are presumably naturalised birds, though a tame bird in early April was probably an escape (MD). An eclipse male on 10<sup>th</sup> July (MAW) was the first of the autumn, followed by 5 female-types on 3<sup>rd</sup> August (JW).

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## Pochard

### Abundant winter visitor

A peak of 258 in November was marginally higher than in 2004/05. Despite some ducks staying late into spring, most pochards cleared out in late March, although a pair remained on Diddington Pit through May and June. A male pochard x tufted duck hybrid was present on Island Pit between 12<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> March.



### Wintering pochards during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits

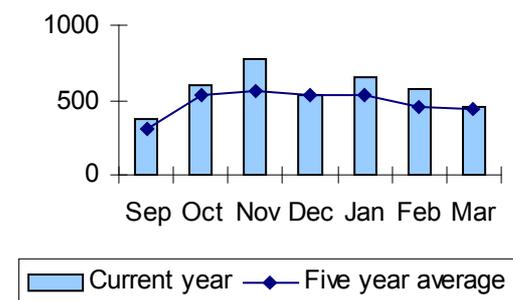
Southbound migrants, presumably failed breeders from farther north, started to appear from mid June and by mid July, a flock of 48 was on Heronry South (MAW).

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## Tufted duck

### Abundant in winter, small number breed

Lower winter counts than the previous year, with a peak of 768 birds on 6<sup>th</sup> November.



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

Breeding numbers and productivity were on a par with recent years: 24 broods hatched at least 111 young, fledging 44. Hatching continued later than usual; although the first chicks were seen in late June, new broods were still being found in mid August.

## Scaup

### Scarce winter visitor

Females on Diddington Pit on 1<sup>st</sup> February (JLFP) and A1 North from 26<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> March (JH) make it the third consecutive year for this seaduck at Paxton.

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## Common scoter

### Scarce winter visitor/passage migrant



Two females reported on Island Pit on 20<sup>th</sup> September and one on 6<sup>th</sup> October (MD) are the only records. By contrast, Grafham Water recorded 96 during the period!

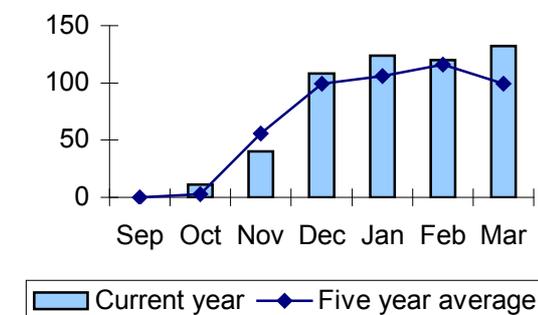
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## Goldeneye

### Abundant winter visitor

The first arriving migrant was seen on 4<sup>th</sup> October (JS), but it was December before numbers really increased, and unusually the peak was late in the winter: 132 on 12<sup>th</sup> March. Three immature males on 7<sup>th</sup> May (MLH) were the last of the winter.

As a postscript, the overwintering 'female' in 2005 turned out to be a male when it moulted!



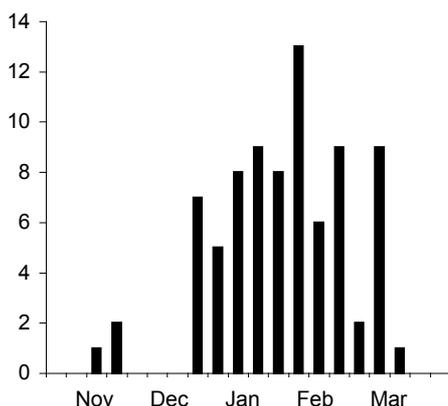
### Wintering goldeneyes during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits

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## Smew

### Annual winter visitor in small numbers

From the first redhead, on 19<sup>th</sup> November (MP/WP) to the last on 16<sup>th</sup> March (CB), it was another good winter for this popular duck. The peak count for a single day was 13 on 1<sup>st</sup> February (JLFP), but as always the proportion of males to redheads in the flock varied each day, so the number of individuals visiting Paxton through the winter must be higher.



*Smew at Paxton Pits.*

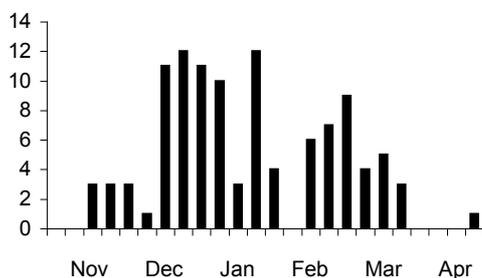
*Peak counts each week, Nov 05-Mar 06*

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## Goosander

### Annual winter visitor in small numbers, though numbers lower than in 1980s

Peak counts of 12 in late December and January, the daily counts involved a minimum of eight males and five females.



*Goosanders at Paxton Pits,*

*Peak counts each week, Nov 05-Apr 06*

The first of the winter, a male on 18<sup>th</sup> November (JS), was on a typical date, but the last, a redhead on 30<sup>th</sup> April

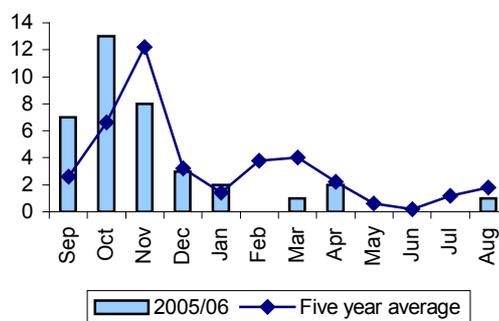
(TGG/JH/JLFP/GAR), was more than a month after the regulars had departed. Loafing on Diddington Pit, it looked rather odd surrounded by common terns, and is the latest ever winter record at Paxton.

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## Ruddy duck

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

Occurring on twice as many dates than in the previous 12 months, 13 on 19<sup>th</sup> October (NP) was earlier than the usual peak. After Christmas, ruddy ducks were recorded on just three dates, and almost all the records this year involved females and immatures.



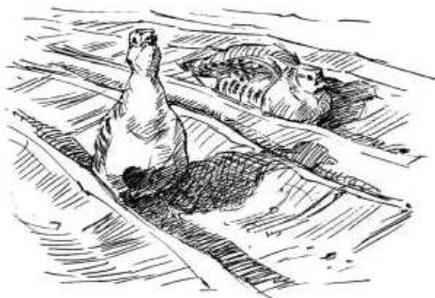
*Peak monthly counts of ruddy ducks at Paxton Pits*

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## Red-legged partridge

### Scarce resident (introduced/released)

There is no evidence that red-legs are still released for shooting locally, so numbers of this non-native but very smart gamebird are falling. The highest count was, as last year, 16 (on 27<sup>th</sup> November, JH/JW), unusually on fields adjacent to A1 North rather than the quarry, which is their usual haunt. They were even scarcer during summer 2006, with up to seven adults and perhaps just one breeding pair. This was confirmed with a covey of six young on 22<sup>nd</sup> July (MD) and a group of 13 was still together in late August.



## Grey partridge

### Scarce resident

Despite no records over the winter, the spring brought better news, with two pairs on Diddington Pit from March to July and, even more impressive, a pair on the arable fields in the nature reserve. There was no evidence of breeding, but just to hold on to this declining species is good news.

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## Quail

### Rare summer visitor

Just outside our recording area, one was found dead at the side of the road between Little Paxton and Hail Weston in early July. If only...

## Pheasant

### Resident (introduced/released)

Stubble on the reserve's arable fields attracted up to 25 (MB), but otherwise pheasants are rarely reported. Four pairs (PBBS) is the only measure of numbers, lower than the previous year. One brood, of five, is the only proven breeding.

## Black-throated diver

### Rare winter visitor

One on 4<sup>th</sup> December (DR) was found on Diddington Pit by birdwatchers visiting the great northern diver (see below). It was only the third record at Paxton, and the first since November 1996. However, despite its rare status, this is the second time that the two diver species could be watched in the same field of view on a Paxton lake.

It's now 30 years since we had a red-throated diver here. Fingers crossed...

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## Great northern diver

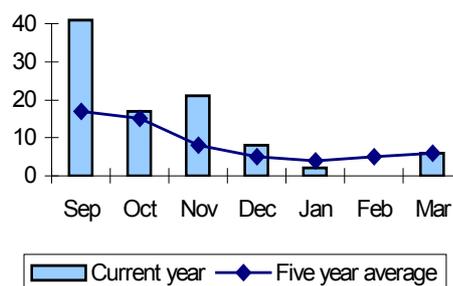
### Rare winter visitor

A juvenile on Diddington Pit from 27<sup>th</sup> November (JH/JW) until 27<sup>th</sup> December then moved to nearby Grafham Water where it stayed until 13<sup>th</sup> May, constituting Huntingdonshire's longest ever stay for the species by some margin.

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## Little grebe

### Resident in small numbers

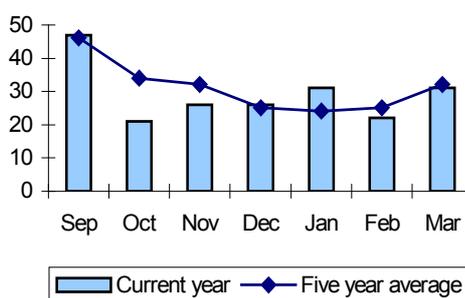


### Little grebes during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits

The count of 41 on 18<sup>th</sup> September was the fourth highest since WeBS began, but numbers dropped markedly during winter. The first chicks were seen in early July, on Farm Pit and Diddington Pit. Five pairs fledged up to 14 young, with good survival among chicks.

## Great crested grebe

### Resident, numbers higher in winter



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

Winter numbers were average, the 47 on 18<sup>th</sup> September including juveniles and moulting adults. Mild weather in October led to some early display (by a pair still feeding large juveniles), but it was early April before weed-dancing began. Six

early nests on Diddington Pit were washed out during strong winds in early May, and they never really recovered. Some pairs re-nested, so 16 attempts is on a par with recent years, with some nesting late into the summer. 18 young fledged, with another five hatched in late August that may survive if September's weather is kind.



### Cormorant

#### Resident, higher numbers in winter

For those who stand in the freezing dusk every week counting cormorants into the roost, it was looking like a standard winter until ten days before Christmas, when numbers doubled. Counts remained above 500 through the rest of the winter, peaking at the end of the season with 589 on 5<sup>th</sup> March (JH). This is the highest count since January 1997 and presumably a result of the prolonged cold weather pushing cormorants west from ice-bound lakes on the continent.

Despite the weather, display started in late December and by 4<sup>th</sup> January 13 nests were occupied. Chicks on 27<sup>th</sup> February (DM/JM) were possibly the earliest ever and at least 30 were visible above the nest cups by mid March, yet the cold weather meant that many pairs were still constructing nests.

The tally of 163 nests was slightly down on 2005 (180 nests), as was a sample count of productivity in early April that found 2.3 young per nest (2.47 in 2005). Two dozen nests were still occupied in mid June, and one still contained large young on 13<sup>th</sup> August (TGG), fledging a few days later.

### Red-necked grebe

#### Scarce visitor, usually in winter

Unlike recent history, the two reported this year were present for just a few hours: one on Sailing Lake (31<sup>st</sup> October, CS) and one on Heronry South (17<sup>th</sup> November, CB).

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### Slavonian grebe

#### Scarce visitor, usually on passage

One on Diddington Pit on 9<sup>th</sup> October (JLFP) was the sole record of the winter.

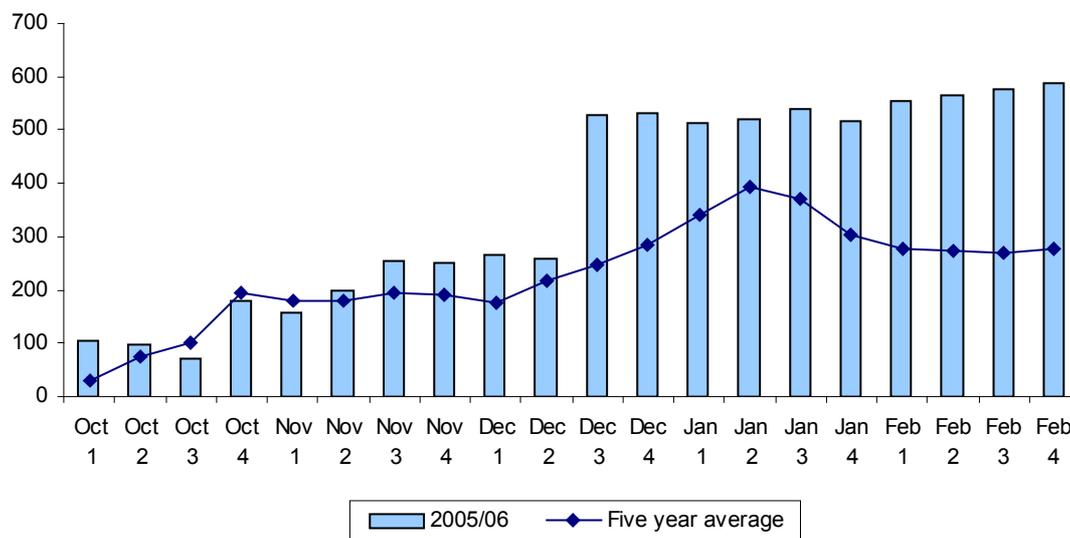
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### Black-necked grebe

#### Scarce visitor, usually on passage

A juvenile from 5<sup>th</sup> September (MD) to 22<sup>nd</sup> October was joined by an adult for 10 days in September. No spring records, for the first time in four years, and only one in early autumn: on 27<sup>th</sup> August (JLFP).

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## Bittern

### Scarce winter visitor

Bitterns are notoriously secretive, but winter 2005/06 was special, with regular sightings on Washout Pit, a bird often in view for hours at a time! The first sighting, on 8<sup>th</sup> November (JS), was earlier than usual and until mid January, reports were sporadic from the southern pits.

(Rob Banbury)



Suspicious that more than one was present were confirmed by the appearance of two bitterns on 29<sup>th</sup> January (NA/MD/NP). One was reported until at least 26<sup>th</sup> March, raising false hopes of breeding at Paxton, but perhaps it didn't travel too far...? This departure date is the latest ever.

In only one of the last 12 winters has a bittern not been present, a reflection of the huge efforts to restore reedbeds for breeding bitterns across southern Britain.

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## Little egret

### Scarce visitor, usually in late summer

Little egrets have become a regular feature at Paxton Pits over recent years. Unlike last year, birds did not stay through the winter, but nevertheless were recorded in every month of the recording period.

Following a Paxton record six birds on 25<sup>th</sup> September and 9<sup>th</sup> October (JW, JLFP) singles were seen on just five dates through the winter, then birds became more regular from 30<sup>th</sup> March. Up to three through the spring and early summer, almost always feeding in the quarry ditches, but occasionally foraging below the cormorant colony on Heronry South.

During July, numbers increased suddenly with 14 little egrets on 16<sup>th</sup> (RMP/JW), including several juveniles. Little egrets bred at Wicken Fen this year - perhaps

some of those birds were involved in setting this new Paxton record count. Double-figure counts continued into August, with up to five regularly roosting on Heronry South. Surely it's only a matter of time before breeding occurs...?

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## Grey heron

### Resident, breeding in small numbers

The nesting season began in mid January, but prolonged cold weather caused the abandonment of several attempts and it was late March before the number of nests peaked. There was a minimum of eight nests (and perhaps as many as ten), making it the best year since at least 1999.

Nine chicks in the three earliest-built nests were growing large by the end of March and at least one nest was still occupied in mid June, but we are uncertain exactly how many fledged. Nevertheless, by what we saw – including fledged juveniles around the Pits during the summer, we think it was a pretty good breeding season.

## Red kite

### Scarce, but increasing, visitor

2006 is set to be a record year for kite sightings at Paxton, with eight between 5<sup>th</sup> February and 30<sup>th</sup> May, one more than in 2005. Five of the eight were in a four-week period in May, so perhaps the same individual. We wonder where the nearest breeding pair is? One on 23<sup>rd</sup> July is the only other record of the period.

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## Marsh harrier

### Scarce, but annual, passage migrant

Four in September and a single in November brought the 2005 total to 12 birds, the best ever year by some distance.

Just three, all females, in spring 2006, on 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> April, with another two in autumn: a juvenile on 31<sup>st</sup> July and a female reported on 25<sup>th</sup> August.

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## Goshawk

### Rare visitor

Reliable records of goshawks are hard to come by, with an average of just three records each year in Cambridgeshire and only three previous sightings at Paxton.

A female over the Haul Road on 18<sup>th</sup> October (JS) was followed by reports from Southoe and the Offords, which might suggest an escaped origin rather than wild. That said, the three previous Paxton records were all in the autumn, presumably as breeding birds disperse.

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## Sparrowhawk

### Resident

Most reported sparrowhawks are singles, but counts of three and one of five in autumn may indicate local movements.

Based on sightings, three pairs probably bred at the Pits (one near Pumphouse Pit where young were seen, and probable pairs south of the A1 Pits and Cloudy Pit), plus at least one pair in the village.

Sparrowhawks were observed taking a variety of prey, from the expected blue tit and greenfinch (from bird tables on the reserve and village gardens), pied wagtail and linnet to ambitious but failed snatches on green woodpecker and green sandpiper.



(Rob Banbury)

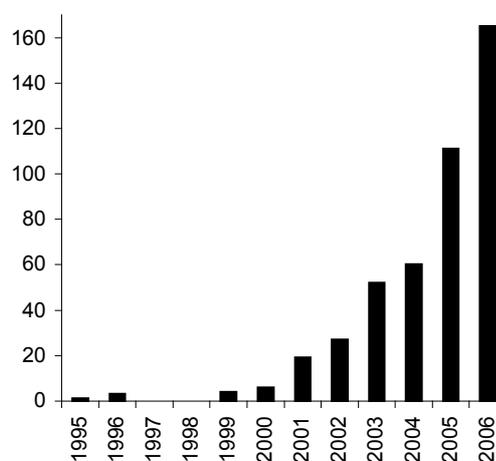
## Buzzard

### Scarce but increasing resident

The recovery of the buzzard continues, reflected by the graph showing that more were seen in the first eight months of 2006 than in any previous 12-month period.

Migration was evident in autumn 2005, with count of up to 10 birds on several

dates between mid September and mid October. The 10 on 2<sup>nd</sup> October (MD/JW) is the highest ever recorded at Paxton.



*Number of buzzard 'days' at Paxton since 1995 (2006 Jan-Aug only)*

Mild days in late winter brought buzzards onto the thermals for some early display: seven in the air together on 27<sup>th</sup> January (JLFP) was the highest count, but five or six together was not an uncommon sight in April. Less visible in May and June, there is no evidence that buzzards bred around the Pits complex, but once again they probably bred in a woodland to the west.

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## Osprey

### Scarce passage migrant

Recorded on eight dates during spring 2006, involving at least five birds. One individual was perhaps responsible for sightings around the river and southern pits on four dates between 29<sup>th</sup> April and 4<sup>th</sup> May. If so, it's the first time that an osprey has stayed for more than two days.

First of the spring was on 30<sup>th</sup> March (JL), the earliest ever Paxton record, and one flying across the A1 on the southern edge of Little Paxton parish on 30<sup>th</sup> May (SB) is the latest ever spring record. One on 21<sup>st</sup> August (JH) was the only early autumn record.

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## Kestrel

### Resident

Most records came from the arable fields on the nature reserve and grassland around A1 North and Diddington Pits. Although regular until spring, reports were less frequent through the summer and we are uncertain whether kestrels bred this year.



A series of records in March, involving at least a male and an immature female, would usually be the last of the season. But an immature male seen on two dates in May and a moulting male on

four dates in July and three dates in August could perhaps have been the same bird summering in the locality. Peregrines now breed at several sites in the east Midlands, so could this be a bird prospecting a future breeding area? Ten years ago, we wouldn't have believed this possible!

## Merlin

### Scarce winter visitor

Recorded on 10 dates in the winter, the most on record. The first was on 11<sup>th</sup> September over Sailing Lake (TB), the last on 11<sup>th</sup> April (MD). Two, a male and female, in the quarry on 8<sup>th</sup> April (MB/MD/JW) was a rare multiple sighting.

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## Hobby

### Common summer visitor, occasionally breeding adjacent to the Pits

The last hobby of 2005, on 28<sup>th</sup> September (KH/IJ), was slightly later than average. The first of spring 2006 was on 17<sup>th</sup> April (TGG), the joint earliest ever (with 2003).

Counts hit double figures from 7<sup>th</sup> May, but it was late in the month before the peak was reached: 16 over Heronry South on 28<sup>th</sup> May (JH/SH) equals the highest count at Paxton set just one year before.

Nesting was confirmed with the sight of an adult feeding two recently fledged juveniles to the west of New Workings (MAW), while one carrying food on 11<sup>th</sup> June (MD/JW) suggested a nest on Paxton Hill, east of the nature reserve.

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## Peregrine

### Scarce winter visitor

A new peak this year, with peregrine recorded on 22 dates. The first of winter was a female on 9<sup>th</sup> September (MD), with birds on a further eight dates. Waders and gulls feeding and roosting are an attractive meal around the northern pits, with golden plover and black-headed gull recorded on the menu this year.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
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## Water rail

### Winter visitor, occasionally breeds

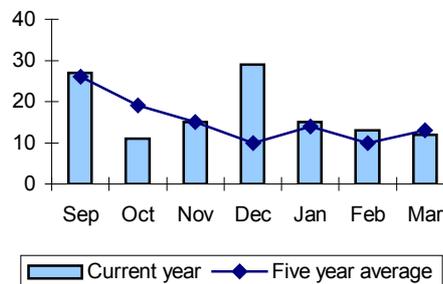
Recorded from eight areas of the Pits through the winter, but most frequently from Washout Pit. The last report of the winter was on 9<sup>th</sup> April (GAR), so no suspicions of breeding this year.

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## Moorhen

### Resident

WeBS counts were typical, save for the peak of 29 birds on 4<sup>th</sup> December.



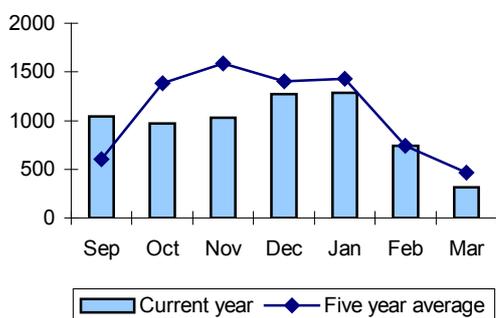
### Wintering moorhens during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits

There were 16 breeding attempts by moorhens during the summer (some pairs are double-brooded), fledging at least 23 young, typical for recent years.

## Coot

### Resident, numbers increase in winter

Top count was 1283 birds on 15<sup>th</sup> January.



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

Following several years of super-breeding (83 nests fledged 111 young in 2004), coot numbers fell this summer: 42 nests fledged a minimum of 23 young.

## Oystercatcher

### Summer visitor, small number breed

The first of 'spring' was on 22<sup>nd</sup> January (MD). By late April, three pairs occupied islands on different pits. Young hatched at all three, but the Pumphouse brood succumbed quickly. One young may have fledged from Diddington Pit, and three of four on Sailing Lake certainly did, making it the best season yet for a species that has reproduced poorly at Paxton since they started breeding here in 1995.

The highest count received was 13: seven over Little Paxton while there were six on the northern pits.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
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## Avocet

### Scarce but increasing spring visitor

Established as a breeder elsewhere in the county since the start of the decade, spring 2006 was the best yet for a species that had occurred at Paxton on only three previous occasions. One on 30<sup>th</sup> March (JLFP), two on 14<sup>th</sup> April (m.o) and one on 1<sup>st</sup> June (JLFP) were all one-day birds. Perhaps one day, a pair will stay...

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## Little ringed plover

### Summer visitor, increasingly scarce

The last of 2005 was on 16<sup>th</sup> September (MD) and the first of 2006 on 24<sup>th</sup> March (MD/JLFP). Seven pairs displayed around the quarry and Pumphouse Pit during the spring, but it was difficult to determine how many nested. Behaviour indicated that one pair hatched young in mid May, but no chicks were reported. Juveniles were seen on several dates during July but could have been raised elsewhere. At best, based on a family group seen on 16<sup>th</sup> July, we believe one pair raised two young. Good numbers were seen through August, with a maximum count of six.

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## Ringed plover

### Summer visitor, small numbers breed

A single on 20<sup>th</sup> January (MD) was the earliest ever spring arrival, but the main passage only started from 10<sup>th</sup> February. Extensive areas of sand and mud on Pumphouse Pit attracted good numbers through April and May, breaking the Paxton flock record on several dates, peaking at 60 birds on 24<sup>th</sup> May (MLH/MAW).

By contrast, the breeding season was disappointing. Ringed plovers were in suitable habitat in four parts of the Pits complex, but there was no successful breeding. Three nests on Pumphouse Pit are the only known attempts, but two were abandoned and the small chick from the other lasted only a few days. This is the third year in four that breeding success has been poor.

Autumn passage was strong through late July and August, with a maximum count of 33 on 22<sup>nd</sup> August (MAW). Many of these were juveniles, including birds on 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> August that were colour-ringed as chicks at Snettisham RSPB reserve earlier in the summer. The first of these was ringed just ten days earlier, on 29<sup>th</sup> July (per JLFP).

*Tundrae race* (lower chart): birds of the northern race were recorded on 22 dates

between 1<sup>st</sup> May and 11<sup>th</sup> June, with these constituting a majority of the ringed plover flock on many dates. 45 of this race on 24<sup>th</sup> May (MAW) is the highest ever count at Paxton, and may be the largest ever group in Cambridgeshire.

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## Golden plover

### Winter visitor, numbers vary

Another good winter for golden plovers, with flocks almost daily from 25<sup>th</sup> September (JW). Flock sizes increased by an order of magnitude, from dozens during the autumn to hundreds in late December. Numbers peaked on 7<sup>th</sup> February at 1384 birds (MD), the highest Paxton count on record. Even in early February, some of these were in full breeding plumage. Counts fell during March, with the last group, of 24, on 23<sup>rd</sup> April (AC/MAW), the latest date for some years. The first of the autumn, 200 on 23<sup>rd</sup> July (JS) were earlier than the norm, and a surprisingly large flock for this point in the year.

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## Grey plover

### Scarce visitor, usually on passage

Typically less than annual in its visits to Paxton, a remarkable 18 birds (minimum) were seen on Pumphouse Pit between 18<sup>th</sup> March and 31<sup>st</sup> May. During early May, there was a daily turnover, with at least eight birds in three days. The highest day count was four individuals.

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## Lapwing

### Resident, numbers increase in winter

As for golden plovers, cold weather on the continent doubtless pushed large numbers west; flocks of over 400 were seen daily through the winter. The highest count was 1500 birds on 15<sup>th</sup> January, roosting in safety on low islands that started to emerge as Pumphouse Pit was drained. This drainage meant that the wader islands were out of action for the breeding season,

but still up to nine pairs nested: on Sailing Lake (4), the quarry (3) and Diddington Pit (2). These fledged at least five young (brood of three on Sailing Lake, two on Diddington Pit), but we received no records from the difficult-to-view quarry, so it could have been more.

Failed breeders from elsewhere congregated from early June, peaking at 650 on 24<sup>th</sup> July, before numbers fell during August.

## Knot

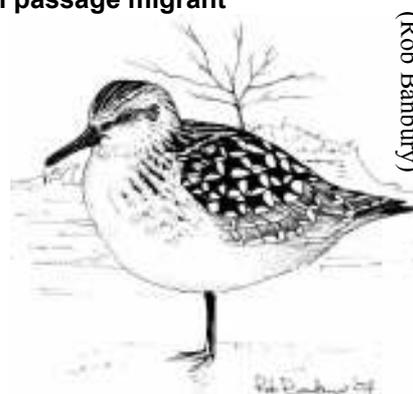
### Scarce passage migrant

The best year ever for knot at Paxton, with 12 during the period (cf. 4 birds in the previous six years!). After one in autumn 2005 (6<sup>th</sup> October), another spanned the year-end. A second bird in January was followed by two in February, four in March, two in April and one in July.

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## Sanderling

### Annual passage migrant



(Rob Banbury)

In a spring where wader records were set to be smashed, the 16 seen in 2004 now looks rather poor! A minimum of 41 sanderlings were seen between 21<sup>st</sup> April and 6<sup>th</sup> June. The peak count was a record 14 birds on 4<sup>th</sup> June (SC), but the majority of the spring total occurred during May.

A further six sanderlings were present during the first 15 days of August, bringing the total to 47 in the first eight months of 2006.

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## Little stint

### Scarce passage migrant

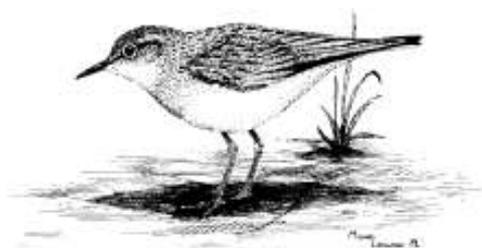
Little stints occur here, on average, every other year - a typical spring count is two. Four in September and October 2005 brought the year's total to seven, while the 2006 figure hit 14 by September.

There were five in spring: one on 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> April (JLFP/MAW); two on 22<sup>nd</sup> May increasing to three on 23<sup>rd</sup>, one of which sang and displayed briefly (MAW); and one on 9<sup>th</sup> June (JLFP). Two were recorded early in the autumn: on 22<sup>nd</sup>-24<sup>th</sup> July (AC/MD/MAW) and on 2<sup>nd</sup> August (JLFP), with more in September.

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## Temminck's stint\*

### Scarce passage migrant



For the fourth successive year, Paxton hosted a Temminck's stint, this one present from 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> May (MAW).

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\*County rarity requiring submission to Cambridgeshire Bird Club Records Committee

## Curlew sandpiper

### Scarce passage migrant

A juvenile on 2<sup>nd</sup> September (JLFP) was the second of 2005. Just one was seen in spring 2006: on 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> April (JLFP/MAW).

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
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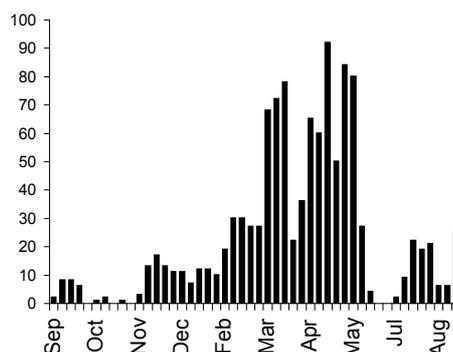
## Dunlin

### Regular passage migrant

Few weeks passed without dunlins during the year. The peak count, 92 on 1<sup>st</sup> May (JLFP), was the highest for more than a decade. Two dunlins among a flock of 25

on 22<sup>nd</sup> May (AC/MAW) are believed to be of a race rarely recorded in Cambridgeshire: *arctica* dunlins are smaller with a short bill and paler yellow upperparts in breeding plumage.

Only three weeks divided spring from autumn passage, with the first southbound bird on 6<sup>th</sup> July and an early autumn peak of 25 birds on 31<sup>st</sup> August.



*Dunlins at Paxton Pits, Peak counts each week, Sep 05 - Aug 06*

## Ruff

### Regular passage migrant

Autumn passage was strong, with birds on 40 dates during August to October, peaking with 10 on 7<sup>th</sup> September (MD), and the last two on 13<sup>th</sup> October (JLFP).

Spring 2006 was a poor year for ruffs, in contrast to most other waders: two in January, one in February, one in March and five in April reflected the low numbers elsewhere in the county in spring.

Autumn migration was better, ruffs seen almost daily from 27<sup>th</sup> July. A minimum of 41 birds were seen, almost all juveniles, with a peak of 13 on 21<sup>st</sup> August (MAW).

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## Jack snipe

### Scarce winter visitor

An average year for a bird that, at Paxton, is reliant on temporary habitat: pools with emergent and open marginal vegetation. No more than two were seen at a time, between 12<sup>th</sup> November and 24<sup>th</sup> March.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
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## Snipe

### Winter visitor in small numbers

Numbers were low through autumn 2005, not increasing until cold weather set in at Christmas. 25 birds on 29<sup>th</sup> December (MD/JW) proved to be the winter peak, with snipe scarce in January and February as the lake shallows froze nightly. The last of the spring was on the late date of 25<sup>th</sup> April (MAW) and the first two of the autumn on the early date of 1<sup>st</sup> July (JLFP).

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## Woodcock

### Scarce winter visitor

Recorded more frequently during the winter than in recent years, from the first on 13<sup>th</sup> November (MD) to the last three on 4<sup>th</sup> March (MD/JW). As usual, grassland among scrub east of the Heronry Pits was a favoured area, with other records coming from the Meadow and Pumphouse Pit.

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## Black-tailed godwit

### Passage migrant, especially in spring

Reported daily through September, though most records relate to just one or two individuals. The last two of the autumn were seen on 2<sup>nd</sup> October (MD/JW).

A few years ago, the minimum 175 black-tailed godwits seen at Paxton during 2006 would have been exceptional, but it is rapidly becoming the norm.

Spring passage involved 26 birds between 22<sup>nd</sup> March and 11<sup>th</sup> May, peaking with seven birds on the last date.

Autumn passage was stronger, starting on 25<sup>th</sup> June and involving at least 149 birds - almost all of the Icelandic race - by the end of August. The largest single flock was 64 birds on 3<sup>rd</sup> July (MAW), one of the largest autumn counts ever at Paxton.

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## Bar-tailed godwit

### Scarce passage migrant, usually spring

Another wader on top form during spring 2006. It kicked off with a flock of 16 on 24<sup>th</sup> March (MD), the largest ever spring count here. A further 22 birds were seen by 11<sup>th</sup> May. Not bad for a species that doesn't occur here every year!

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## Whimbrel

### Scarce passage migrant

This African migrant, stopping off en route to Orkney moorlands or beyond, has been more frequently recorded at Paxton in recent years, but this is nevertheless a record year. A total of 33 were seen between 16<sup>th</sup> April and 13<sup>th</sup> May, including 17 on 7<sup>th</sup> May (MLH/PAEL/SM) that constitutes the largest count at Paxton.

Autumn passage began with five on 2<sup>nd</sup> July then singles on 22<sup>nd</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup> July and 3<sup>rd</sup> August, bringing the total to 40 birds.

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## Curlew

### Scarce passage migrant

The number of curlews seen at Paxton has remained fairly constant over the last decade. There were eleven in autumn 2005, the last three on 16<sup>th</sup> October. Spring 2006 was typical for recent years: seven birds between 1<sup>st</sup> February and 5<sup>th</sup> May, and there were 14 in early autumn, from 24<sup>th</sup> July.

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## Spotted redshank

### Rare passage migrant

It was a great year for spotshanks at Paxton, thanks to exposed mud on the northern pits. One on 9<sup>th</sup> May was the only spring record. But August brought at least nine juveniles: one from 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup>, one on 13<sup>th</sup>, then daily from 16<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> August involving a minimum seven individuals.

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## Redshank

Year-round visitor, small numbers breed



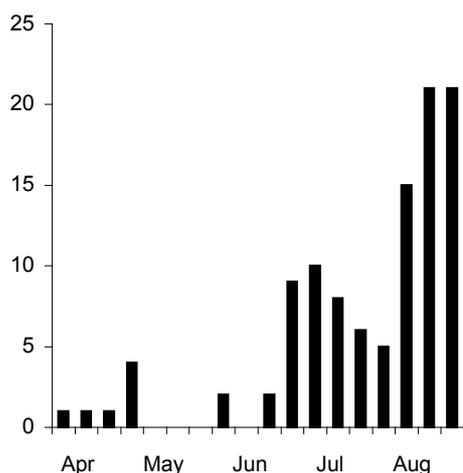
Recorded in every month of the year- the highest count was 25 on 7<sup>th</sup> April (JLFP).

Birds displayed over Sailing Lake, Diddington Pit and the quarry in May, but an unknown number of breeding attempts were made. A brood of four hatched on Sailing Lake from which at least two birds fledged; at least two fledged from Diddington Pit and a probable second brood from here fed around Island Pit but we do not know whether these fledged.

## Greenshank

Regular passage migrant in small numbers, mostly in autumn

A minimum of 13 birds, between 15<sup>th</sup> April and 8<sup>th</sup> June (though the direction of travel of this latter bird is unknown), is the best spring on record. Four on 11<sup>th</sup> May (JLFP) was the highest count.



*Greenshanks at Paxton Pits, Weekly peak counts, mid April - Aug 06*

Autumn passage began on 28<sup>th</sup> June (JLFP), with strong passage in July and August, when greenshanks were recorded

daily. A peak count of 21 on 21<sup>st</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> August is the highest on the Paxton record.

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## Green sandpiper

Winter visitor in small numbers

Only one or two through the winter, the second successive year of low numbers. The last was seen on 24<sup>th</sup> April (JLFP).

As always, the first green sandpipers are early autumn arrivals, the first two of these white-rumped waders on 18<sup>th</sup> June (JLFP). Peak counts of three in June, 11 in July and a remarkable 21 in August (MAW) make this the best ever autumn for the species here.

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## Wood sandpiper

Annual passage migrant

After just one spring record, a summer-plumage bird on 24<sup>th</sup> April (JW), a minimum of seven birds (but perhaps 10) were seen between 27<sup>th</sup> July and the end of August, all juveniles, with a peak of five birds together on 22<sup>nd</sup> (JLFP/MAW). This was the largest group ever seen at Paxton, and three remained until late in the month.

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## Common sandpiper

Passage migrant, has overwintered

Migration through September 2005 (peak count 5 birds) ended with one on 24<sup>th</sup> (JH). For the fifth winter in a row, a common sandpiper overwintered, seen sporadically on the A1 Pits, Sailing Lake and Pumphouse Pit from 15<sup>th</sup> October to 4<sup>th</sup> December. One on 5<sup>th</sup> March could have been an early migrant.

Spring passage involved a minimum of 25 birds, above the recent average, but never with more than three at a time. The last spring record was on 23<sup>rd</sup> May and the first of autumn on 24<sup>th</sup> June (both JLFP).

The autumn peak was in late July (15 birds on 30<sup>th</sup>, JLFP), with a high turnover during

August probably involving several dozen birds through the month.

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### Turnstone

**Scarce, but annual, passage migrant**

Another wader hitting the record books, with 29 turnstones this year: a minimum of 14 between 1<sup>st</sup> May and 13<sup>th</sup> June (peak: 3 on 7<sup>th</sup> May, PAEL/SM/MAW). There were another 15 from 20<sup>th</sup> July to the end of August (peak: 5 on 26<sup>th</sup> August, WS).

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### Arctic skua\*

Rare visitor



A new addition to the Paxton list, thanks to a dark-phase juvenile on 11<sup>th</sup> September. Initially spotted flying over the arable fields on the nature reserve (MB), it was picked up independently on Pumphouse Pit (MD/JW) before it flew off high to the northeast. It presumably had flown into The Wash and up the Great Ouse during its migration, but had decided to turn around when it realised that inland England wouldn't provide much food!

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\*County rarity requiring submission to Cambridgeshire Bird Club Records Committee

### Mediterranean gull

**Scarce, but annual, passage migrant**

Up to 12 birds during the recording period. At least two in September 2005: an adult on 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> (JW, MD) and a first-winter on 14<sup>th</sup> (JW) and 25<sup>th</sup> (SC), brought the 2005 total to four.

A series of sightings on Pumphouse Pit, involving up to two adults, a first-summer and a second-summer bird, between 15<sup>th</sup> March and 3<sup>rd</sup> April brought hope that we might have a new breeding species among the black-headed gulls. Although the adults and the second-summer birds displayed (MD, MAW), their presence was short-lived; a first-summer on 5<sup>th</sup> May (MAW) was the only other spring record.

Their appearance at Paxton in late summer has become a regular feature, with an adult on 16<sup>th</sup> July (AC) and juvenile/first-winters on 2<sup>nd</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> August (JLFP, MD, MAW).

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### Little gull

**Passage migrant in small numbers**

A first-winter on 18<sup>th</sup> October was relatively late, though overwintering is not unprecedented of this species here (one stayed until December in 1999).



A first-winter bird found on 30<sup>th</sup> March (JLFP) remained in the area, usually on Pumphouse Pit, until 18<sup>th</sup> April.

Otherwise it was a poor spring passage, with six first-summer birds and three adults between 21<sup>st</sup> April and 4<sup>th</sup> June. Nevertheless, these dainty seabirds are always a treat, especially in full summer plumage. The finder of one of the adults on 22<sup>nd</sup> May (MAW) reported that it was the "pinkest I've ever seen".

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### Black-headed gull

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

The recolonisation of the pits by black-headed gulls has been a real success story of recent years. By late April, they were keen to assert their tenure of Pumphouse

Pit island: 2142 black-heads on 27<sup>th</sup> April (JH) is the highest recorded at the Pits.

However, low water levels on the lake resulted in disturbance and predation and they abandoned attempts in mid May (chicks had hatched but died). The colony relocated to Diddington Pit where an estimated 240 nests produced at least 345 young, fewer than in 2005 but impressive given the interest from carrion crows and larger gulls in the eggs and young.

## Common gull

### Regular in small numbers in winter

Larger numbers than usual were present from November until late March, with three-figure counts daily and a peak of 600 birds on 22<sup>nd</sup> March (JLFP). One cobalt-blue individual was easily distinguishable and seen at Grafham Water too. It is suspected to have washed in polluted water containing dye, but seemed unperturbed by its odd plumage.

Numbers fell markedly during April and none was seen between 17<sup>th</sup> May and 2<sup>nd</sup> July (both JLFP). The midsummer peak count was 60 on 2<sup>nd</sup> August (MAW).

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## Lesser black backed gull

### Year round visitor, and now breeding

From mid January, a colour-ringed adult (marked as a chick at Orfordness in Suffolk) was seen regularly and went on to breed on Diddington Pit. It was among four pairs that nested: three on Diddington Pit (from which two pairs fledged three and one young) and one on Pumphouse Pit (which was abandoned in early July).

This species now has a year-round presence at Paxton, with a flock of mixed-age non-breeding birds through May (63 on 5<sup>th</sup>, JH), numbers increasing later in the summer, peaking at 142 on 10<sup>th</sup> August (MD). Many pass over Little Paxton every evening heading for Grafham Water to roost but are rarely counted. The scale of these daily movements can be judged from the count of 2232 birds in 45 minutes at dusk on 24<sup>th</sup> August (MAW).

## Herring gull

### Year round visitor, and now breeding

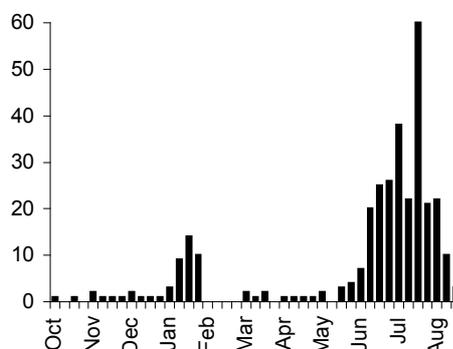
After hosting Cambridgeshire's first breeding record in 2005, two pairs nested on the northern pits: a pair fledged two young on Diddington Pit and a nest was occupied but failed on Pumphouse Pit.

## Yellow-legged gull

### Scarce but increasing visitor

The northward expansion of this species from the continent has been an ornithological feature of the last decade, so this year's figures are unsurprising, but remarkable nevertheless.

Recorded on 115 dates (39 in 2005/06), most were of the western race *michahellis*. The graph illustrates a mid-winter peak, with 14 on 27<sup>th</sup> January (MD) breaking the site record. This was nothing compared to the midsummer peak that smashed the site and the county record on several dates. A flock of 60 in the Pumphouse pre-roost on 22<sup>nd</sup> July (MD/RMP/MAW) may take a while to beat, but we wouldn't bet on it!



### *Yellow-legged gulls at Paxton Pits, Peak counts each week, Oct 05 - Aug 06*

With two other large gull species now nesting at Paxton, could yellow-legged gull be a future breeder? A pair was seen displaying in March (MLH) and one in May appeared to be paired with a lesser black-backed gull (JLFP/MAW).

Eastern race *cachinnans*: second-winter birds on 3<sup>rd</sup> February (MD) and 11<sup>th</sup> March (MD/JW), a second-summer on 12<sup>th</sup> April (MAW) and an adult on 15<sup>th</sup> July (RMP) takes the total of the 'Caspian' form to 12.

## Great black backed gull

### Non-breeding visitor in small numbers

Always scarcer than the other large gulls, the highest count received was 74 on 24<sup>th</sup> January (JLFP). Up to five remained through May and a first-summer bird was present through June too.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
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## Kittiwake

### Rare passage visitor

A remarkable spring. Six birds made it the best since 1988. By contrast, there were just two records in the 1990s!



For the record:

- A first-winter, 9<sup>th</sup> March (MD)
- Adult and first-winter, 25<sup>th</sup> March (MD/JH)
- Adult, 29<sup>th</sup> March (MD)
- Adult, 28<sup>th</sup> April (MD/MLH)
- Adult, 21<sup>st</sup> May (JH/PAEL)

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## Sandwich tern

### Scarce migrant, usually in spring

One on 23<sup>rd</sup> April moved widely around the Pits (AC/NP/MAW), then three adults were watched for 20 minutes before dusk on 13<sup>th</sup> August. This remains a scarce visitor, but has occurred in four of the last six years.

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## Roseate tern\*

### Rare vagrant

Despite unconfirmed claims in each of the last two years, this seemed an unlikely addition to the Paxton list. Until, that is, 3<sup>rd</sup> June when one settled among common terns on Diddington Pit (JLFP). With multiple observers and photographs, this should have no problem



being accepted as the sixth for Cambridgeshire, the first for 22 years.

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\*County rarity requiring submission to Cambridgeshire Bird Club Records Committee

## Common tern

### Common passage migrant and colonial breeder

The first to arrive in spring 2006, on 3<sup>rd</sup> April (m.o.), equals the earliest ever at Paxton (with 1999). Nesting was more successful on Sailing Lake than last year, thanks to less disturbance from unauthorised visits to the island. At least 10 nests fledged 20 young here, while 52 fledged from Diddington Pit, despite predation of chicks by herring and lesser black-backed gull neighbours.

Up to 170 common terns in mid July included many juveniles, but two ringed juveniles being fed by a ringed adult illustrates that family groups from elsewhere stop here during post-fledging dispersal. A family party from nearby Willington gravel pits were seen at Minsmere on the Suffolk coast just a few days after fledging last year!

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## Arctic tern

### Annual on passage in small numbers

One on 25<sup>th</sup> September (JW) is the latest ever recorded at Paxton. 2006 was the second successive excellent spring for this scarce seabird inland. Over nine days from 23<sup>rd</sup> April, a minimum of 195 birds were seen. The best day, 29<sup>th</sup> April, saw 136 with groups of up to 40 feeding briefly before heading northeast (MD/NP/JLFP/JW). This constitutes the best ever day record at Paxton and surely one of the best ever years. The only spring record outside this nine-day period was a first-summer on 28<sup>th</sup> May (JW).

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
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## Little tern

### Scarce passage visitor

Three this spring: one on 29<sup>th</sup> April (CD) and two on 11<sup>th</sup> May (MLH/PAEL) brings the tally to 15 in three years, almost half the total since 1962. Definitely a bird that is occurring more frequently.

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## Black tern

### Annual on passage in small numbers

Fourteen were seen during a short passage between 5<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> September, including 11 on 7<sup>th</sup> September (MD/JLFP).

Following one on 16<sup>th</sup> April, a further 73 birds were seen during the spring, making it the best in recent years. The largest group was 18 on 12<sup>th</sup> May (MAW). Last of the spring was on 10<sup>th</sup> June (JH/JLFP).

Two juveniles fed around the northern pits from 27<sup>th</sup> August into September.

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## 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.

Winter roost counts on Heronry South in October and December did not exceed 80 birds. The only gauge of breeding numbers was from the Paxton Breeding Bird Survey, which found five pairs.

## Woodpigeon

### Abundant resident

The only records of this abundant bird came from the PBBS, which recorded 41 pairs, on a par with 2005.

## Collared dove

### Abundant resident in village

Attracted to the well-stocked bird table outside the Visitors' Centre, there are regularly a dozen or more collared doves here. 34 were in the vicinity on 11<sup>th</sup> November (JLFP). This area also held two of the three territorial pairs recorded during the PBBS. The only other large count came from the edge of Diddington Pit on 4<sup>th</sup> December, where 42 perched on electricity wires (MD/JH/JW).

## Turtle dove

### Summer visitor

The last of 2005 was on 19<sup>th</sup> September (JLFP) and the first of 2006 on 21<sup>st</sup> April.



Reports in April and May suggested turtle doves were scarce, although cool, wet weather probably didn't encourage them to call. The PBBS recorded 11 territories, almost all on the nature reserve, a slight fall on 2005. Several family groups were noted from mid July through August.

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## Cuckoo

### Declining summer visitor

The harbinger of spring came slightly later than in recent years, with the first on 15<sup>th</sup> April (GAR). By all accounts, this was the best year for some time, with a walk around the Pits on most days in May accompanied by the call of several males.

We estimate that six males were present this year, although rather worryingly only one female was reported. Calling continued through June, the last heard on 1<sup>st</sup> July (MB). With no young seen for a second year, this was the last of 2006.

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## Barn owl

### Scarce visitor, occasionally breeds

Through late winter and early spring, barn owls were regularly seen hunting over the fields adjacent to Island Pit and, encouragingly, over the arable fields managed for wildlife in the nature reserve. Pellets were found around three nestboxes, showing that they were being used for roosting. However, we received no reports after 30<sup>th</sup> April, but it may simply be that most birdwatchers aren't around the Pits at dusk during the midsummer.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
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## Little owl

### Recorded sporadically

After a couple of years with few reports, two little owls were seen regularly in Diddington village during the winter, moving out to hunt over the grasslands as night falls. One was seen close to a suitable nest site in mid May, suggesting that breeding may have been attempted.

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## Tawny owl

### Resident in small numbers

Calling birds were heard during the winter from two areas of the village and Sailing Lake, and again there during daylight in July and August. The only summer records were three, perhaps a family group, from trees near Cloudy Pit (1<sup>st</sup> July, SP) and one that became tangled in an angler's line on Hayling Lake around midnight on 28<sup>th</sup> July (per MD).

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
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## Long-eared owl

### Rare winter visitor

A pleasant surprise while birding an underwatched area of the Pits on 4<sup>th</sup> March was a roost of three long-eared owls (MD/JW), featured as our cover bird this year. Perhaps there all winter, they were present at least until the end of April, but were largely left alone by local birders to avoid disturbing the birds.

Assumed to have headed off to breeding grounds in early May, a surprise awaited a visitor on 4<sup>th</sup> June who found one in a tree along the river only a few hundred yards to the south of the roost. Might we have breeding long-eared owls, we wonder?

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
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## Short-eared owl

### Occasional winter and passage visitor

A more frequent sight in recent years, but only for the fortunate few. Five records: 23<sup>rd</sup> September (JW), 16<sup>th</sup> October (JH/NP/JW), 25<sup>th</sup> April (MD), 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> May (JH/GAR/MAW). The last two, probably the same bird, are the latest ever records at Paxton; they are usually holding territory on moorlands by this date.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
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## Swift

### Summer visitor, occasionally breeds

The last of 2005, on 25<sup>th</sup> September (JW), is one of the latest ever autumn records at Paxton, though the first of 2006 - on 25<sup>th</sup> April (MAW) - were also some of the latest spring 'firsts'.

Peak passage was between 17<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> May, when flocks of up to 200 were seen daily during unsettled weather. Late May brought wet weather and so more swifts: a flock of 300 on 31<sup>st</sup> (JLFP), and even during June groups of 40 or 50 were seen.

We received no reports to suggest breeding in the village.

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## Kingfisher

### Resident, but numbers fluctuate

Seen frequently around the pits until mid winter, prolonged cold weather into May did kingfishers no favours. Only around Heronry Pit were sightings regular enough during May to August to suggest that nesting may have been attempted; four together in late August seems to confirm this. A second pair may have nested on Hayling Pit, but no young were reported.

## Green woodpecker

### Increasing resident

Noisy in springtime, several observers saw six in a single visit during April, but only the PBBS gives a guide to breeding numbers: eight pairs, slightly down on 2005, with several juveniles in July indicating breeding success.

## Great spotted woodpecker

### Common resident

These become very audible in the second half of the winter, with regular drumming on tree trunks (and telegraph poles), calling, and males chasing potential mates. Drumming was noted from 4<sup>th</sup> January and as late as 4<sup>th</sup> May (JH). The PBBS estimates five breeding pairs, with evidence that they are spreading outside the nature reserve as trees mature.

## Lesser spotted woodpecker

### Declining, locally almost extinct

This must be “Paxton’s Most Wanted”. Many visiting birders are keen to see lesser spots, their appetites whetted by the superb photographs taken in March (IJ).



Sadly, they are as rare and elusive as elsewhere in Britain now, but nine records in the period illustrates that it is not a completely lost cause. Most records come from Heronry South and Cloudy Pit (with lesser spots seen feeding on peanuts at both sites!) and just one from the village, along Mill Lane. One calling in the Meadow on 14<sup>th</sup> June (JS) suggests that breeding is just a slight possibility, though there were no further sightings before September.

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## Skylark

### Resident, numbers increase in winter

Flocks over 50 were noted on several dates in November and December, but this was the extent of migration recorded. Birds were in full song from late February, and the PBBS recorded 13 pairs, including one over Great Meadow that marks the return of skylark to the nature reserve. Grassland around the northern pits and the pea crop west of Haul Road accounted for all of the remainder.

## Sand martin

### Summer visitor

After the last two of 2005 on 2<sup>nd</sup> October (MD/JW) it was a long wait for the first of spring. In fact, two over Diddington Pit on 25<sup>th</sup> March were the latest ‘firsts’ for many years, but the main rush was not far behind and within a week birds were investigating a sand bank for nesting.

Recent excavations are a favourite for sand martins; this year the birds were almost following the digger around the quarry! An estimated 290 nests were active here by mid May, with the quarry manager finding a further 94 in piles of sand on Washout Pit. One nest was still active on 13<sup>th</sup> August, by which time southward migration was well underway with counts of 500-700 per hour.

The nest total, 384, is higher than any previous year for which we have records. Well done to Bardon Aggregates for ensuring that the nests were protected from quarrying operations.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
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## Swallow

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

The last of 2005, seven on 9<sup>th</sup> October (JLFP), was slightly earlier than recent autumns. The first four of spring were on 28<sup>th</sup> March (MD) but no significant passage was reported, indicative perhaps of the declines across eastern Britain in recent years. Juveniles were seen in mid June around Paxton lock, the only regular breeding site in our recording area.

Usually scarce during the summer, it is notable that up to a dozen were seen regularly over the paddock once the sheep arrived, the first to graze at Paxton for decades. Perhaps they came from Great Paxton, but let's hope that more animals on the nature reserve might bring insects so beloved by swallows.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
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## House martin

**Common on passage, small numbers breed**

Flocks of several hundred house martins foraged southward in early September, a few were seen during October, but several over Gordon Road on 5<sup>th</sup> November (MB) were the latest ever seen locally.

House martins were very scarce in April, even though the first was reported on 2<sup>nd</sup>. Only in early May were larger numbers evident. A dozen birds gathered mud on Washout Pit in early June, but otherwise this species was difficult to see at the Pits.

Eight nests were counted on village houses early in June. There may have been later nests, but numbers are certainly lower than a decade ago.

Post-breeding flocks of 150 were seen from 1<sup>st</sup> August, beginning their southward migration, increasing to 700 birds an hour by the end of the month.

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## Meadow pipit

**Abundant in winter, breeds irregularly**

Around 30 wintered around the quarry and spring passage peaked at 90 birds on 15<sup>th</sup> March (JLFP).

At least two pairs nested around the Pits. One displayed from mid April around Pumphouse Pit and evidently found a mate because adults were seen carrying food (and chastising a cuckoo!) during May, and two fledged young were spotted in July (JLFP). A bird carried food to a nest in the Great Meadow in early June, the first breeding record for the nature reserve. A bird was also present around the A1 Pits

in May, but we received no follow-up reports from this underwatched area.

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## Rock pipit

**Scarce on passage from Scandinavia**

Singles on 5<sup>th</sup> (JW) and 22<sup>nd</sup> October (MD/JW) brought the 2005 total to six. Three were seen in April 2006, two on 2<sup>nd</sup> (MD/CM/NP/GAR) and one on 8<sup>th</sup> (JLFP/GAR). As usual, the northern pits were favoured, the open areas of bare soil provide excellent feeding opportunities.

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## Water pipit

**Scarce winter visitor**

It has often surprised us how few water pipits are recorded at Paxton, given the suitable habitat and their presence at other gravel pits in the valley. Sharp listening ensured that one was found on 20<sup>th</sup> November (JW) and a second bird was confirmed on 10<sup>th</sup> December (MD); at least one was seen regularly until 3<sup>rd</sup> April. This is the longest staying water pipit, and also the latest date that one has been recorded in spring.

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## Yellow wagtail

**Passage migrant; now a scarce breeder**

Strong passage during early September; 54 birds on 10<sup>th</sup> (MD) was notable. The last of 2005, on 9<sup>th</sup> October (NP), was the latest autumn sighting for some years.

Spring began early, the first two birds on 31<sup>st</sup> March (MB/JLFP). Passage was better than the previous two years: double-figure counts were made on six dates in mid April and early May. A female with a grey back caused brief consternation, but subsequent local discussion confirmed that this form occurs quite frequently.

After spring passage was over, a male regularly fed in the quarry, flying towards the river where it is suspected a nest was active, the first here since 2003.

Autumn passage was noted from 30<sup>th</sup> July, peaking with 33 birds on 30<sup>th</sup> August.

*Blue-headed race* (lower chart): a male and female on 11<sup>th</sup> April (MD), the first for three years

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### Grey wagtail

**Localised resident, usually along river**  
Up to three were seen around the southern Pits and singles were around the quarry and in the village during the winter. By mid April, birds were back on their river territory near the Mill lock.

One pair hatched young at the lock (MD/MSh). We do not know whether young fledged from this nest, but two juveniles in the village on 26<sup>th</sup> August (MAW) may well have come from here.

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### Pied wagtail

**Abundant resident in village and Pits**



The only notable count of the winter was 67 birds roosting in the new apartments on The Island, adjacent to the Mill lock. Large numbers passed through the quarry in early April, peaking at 46 birds on 18<sup>th</sup> April (MAW).

The PBBS found four pairs, a slight decline, with two pairs in the quarry (one pair nested in a temporary pile of gravel) and one in the Lafarge coatings plant that seemed to feed its chicks on an abundant supply of banded demoiselles from Heronry South!

*White wagtail* (lower chart): an unprecedented spring passage with up to

161 birds. Between 26<sup>th</sup> March and 1<sup>st</sup> May, birds fed regularly on the Pumphouse Pit ‘sandbanks’ peaking with 19 birds on 12<sup>th</sup> April (JLFP), only one short of the county best.

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### Waxwing

**Rare winter visitor**

In a locally poor year for waxwings, one reported near Hayden Hide on 15<sup>th</sup> January remains unconfirmed.

### Wren

**Abundant resident**

At 60 pairs (PBBS), breeding numbers at the Pits were well down on the 85 pairs in 2005, perhaps a result of the long cold winter. But providing wrens had a good breeding season, they will surely bounce back. Many more were in village gardens.

### Dunnock

**Abundant resident**

We received no *ad hoc* records of dunnocks from the village or the Pits besides one that had learned to hang onto a peanut feeder outside the Visitors’ Centre (MD)! The PBBS found 38 breeding pairs around the Pits, a further increase on 2005.

### Robin

**Abundant resident**

Fifty breeding pairs (PBBS) represents a steady population and distribution at the Pits. 15 nestboxes are maintained by volunteers, but occupancy is low: just two were used in 2005. Many juveniles were seen in village gardens, where the species is common.



### Nightingale

**Common summer visitor**

Cold northerly winds in early April slowed the arrival of Paxton’s most well-known songster. After the first, on 10<sup>th</sup> April (JP), the floodgates opened and 18 males were singing by 20<sup>th</sup>.

The final estimate, of 28 territories, was two up on last year, of which 20 were on the nature reserve. It was a welcome return to birds around the Pits south of the Visitors' Centre, with three here for the first time since 2002. Males sang well into June, with one seen on several dates singing in the open for up to five minutes at a time from an overhead cable. As an often elusive bird, this one was evidently desperate for a mate!

We received only two records of juveniles, though so secretive are they, this is not unusual. These, on 20<sup>th</sup> June and 5<sup>th</sup> August, preceded the last two of the year: one near to Island Pit on 6<sup>th</sup> August (KB/JW) and one reported on 13<sup>th</sup> August.

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See page 60 for a report on the availability of insect prey to nightingales.

### Whinchat

#### Scarce, but annual, passage migrant

Two each in autumn 2005 and spring 2006: singles on 2<sup>nd</sup> (JLFP) and 24<sup>th</sup> (JW) September and two males - but almost two miles apart - on 25<sup>th</sup> April (MD, NP).

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### Stonechat

#### Scarce autumn passage migrant and occasional winter visitor

A minimum of five birds between 16<sup>th</sup> October and 4<sup>th</sup> December, but with no overwintering as last year.

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### Wheatear

#### Declining passage migrant

Autumn 2005: nine birds on six dates does not suggest a great breeding season farther north. The last, on 17<sup>th</sup> October (JLFP), is one of the latest autumn records.

The first 2006 arrival was late, with just a single record in March, on 29<sup>th</sup>. Recorded on a further 15 dates before the last two on 2<sup>nd</sup> May, the peak count was just six on 22<sup>nd</sup> April (MLH/NP). Not a great spring.

*Greenland race* (lower chart): only two birds were reported as this subspecies, on 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> April

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### Blackbird

#### Abundant resident, with winter influx

We received no counts of Scandinavian birds during the winter, and the only breeding count comes from the PBBS, which recorded 50 pairs. This slight fall in number around the Pits causes blackbird to fall out of the top 10 breeding species for the first time.

### Fieldfare

#### Abundant winter visitor

From the first two on 16<sup>th</sup> October (JH/NP/JW), there was a moderate arrival during late October and early January. However, cold weather after Christmas brought larger counts, the largest being 350 on 23<sup>rd</sup> January (JLFP). Three-figure counts continued into March, before the last flock, 76 on 26<sup>th</sup>, was seen (NP/GAR).

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### Song thrush

#### Increasing resident

A breeding population of 23 pairs around the Pits (PBBS) is the highest yet, which is great news for a Red-list bird. Three birds showing characteristics of the nominate race *philomelos*, from the continent, were close to the quarry on 12<sup>th</sup> April (MAW).

### Redwing

#### Abundant winter visitor

Less abundant than fieldfare. The first two on 6<sup>th</sup> October preceded an arrival that peaked at 300 on 16<sup>th</sup> (JH/NP/JW). Only small numbers remained here through the winter and there was no obvious spring passage. Three on 10<sup>th</sup> April (MD/JH) were the last of the winter.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
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## Mistle thrush

### Localised resident

The song of the mistle thrush, much scarcer at Paxton than its smaller relative, was first heard early in January. It was a good year, with five breeding pairs: birds held territory around Pumphouse Pit and Sailing Lake, the latter finding nest material from as far away as Wray House Garden, while two pairs in Diddington foraged around the pits. The pair near Pumphouse Pit were seen with two fledged young in early June and we believe a pair nested near Paxton Lock.

However, mistle thrushes are now scarce in Little Paxton away from the north edge.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
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## Cetti's warbler\*

### Scarce visitor

We received two reports of this species, recorded at Paxton only five times.

However, neither report was confirmed.

\*County rarity requiring submission to Cambridgeshire Bird Club Records Committee

## Grasshopper warbler

### Declining passage migrant and breeder

After two years of multiple territories, we were down to just one, and even that may not have stayed. One was found near A1 North on 11<sup>th</sup> June during the Paxton Breeding Bird Survey (SJ/JS) and was present the following day, but not subsequently. Did it breed or go?

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## Sedge warbler

### Abundant summer visitor

The last of 2005, on 17<sup>th</sup> September (MD) was the latest autumn record since 1993.

By contrast, the first of 2006 – on 8<sup>th</sup> April – was the latest for some years. By 23<sup>rd</sup> April, 48 males were counted in just one part of the Pits complex (GAR) and it was clearly going to be a good year. Indeed, at 99 territories it proved to be the best since our records began, with land outside the nature reserve proving relatively more

important (it contained two-thirds of the total population). The number of singing males fluctuates markedly, this year's high coming just 12 months after a record low.

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## Reed warbler

### Abundant summer visitor

The last of 2005, on 24<sup>th</sup> September (JW), was almost the latest ever.

After a run of early arrivals in recent years, we had to wait a while for the first (three) of 2006, although 22<sup>nd</sup> April is actually bang on the long-term average.

The PBBS recorded 72 singing males, a good year particularly on the nature reserve. Hayling Lake held more than in recent years, quite possibly benefiting from the removal of scrub from the reedbed as part of the management plan.

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## Lesser whitethroat

### Localised summer visitor

The last of 2005 was on 10<sup>th</sup> September (MD/JH/JW) and the first two of 2006 on 22<sup>nd</sup> April (MSh). For the second consecutive year, good numbers were noted, especially on the nature reserve.



The PBBS estimated 11 breeding pairs, the highest population yet and in contrast to a 35% decline across the UK.

Several observers noted a 'second wind' of at least five males singing in mid June, several weeks after most pairs were getting down to breeding. Usually single-brooded, it seems likely that these were a new wave of migrants perhaps held up by bad weather in May.

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## Whitethroat

### Common summer visitor

Strong passage was noted in early September, with the last of 2005 on a later-than-average of 25<sup>th</sup> (JW). The first returning bird of 2006, on a typical date of 16<sup>th</sup> April, preceded arrivals in good numbers with whitethroats holding territories in place not previously seen. The PBBS recorded 53 pairs, the highest since it began, much of the increase occurring in the nature reserve.

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## Garden warbler

### Common summer visitor

The last of 2005, around Heronry South on 2<sup>nd</sup> October (EMc) was the first ever record for that month at Paxton.

The first arrival of April 2006, on 21<sup>st</sup>, was later than in recent years. 54 breeding pairs were recorded by the PBBS with almost 70% on the nature reserve. The population has remained stable for several years, having increased significantly earlier in the decade.

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## Blackcap

### Abundant summer visitor

The last presumed migrant was a male around the Moorings on 21<sup>st</sup> October (JS). We received just a single report of blackcap during the winter, a male in the village on Boxing Day (GB), after several years of regular overwintering birds. One on 31<sup>st</sup> March (MB) was the first of the spring.

The breeding survey found 69 pairs at the Pits (PBBS), a new high count boosted by their northward spread. Four in five are on the nature reserve, which have been recovering from a dip that began in 2000.

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## Chiffchaff

### Declining summer visitor

During autumn passage, several birds stay for a while and give short bursts of song. In 2005, singing birds were heard until 18<sup>th</sup> October. Birds were seen in the village and at the Pits throughout the winter, with up to six birds present. One seen around Cloudy Pit on 22<sup>nd</sup> March (JS) was probably the first migrant, followed by counts of up to 24 before the end of the month. Many of these early birds stay for a short while and move north, leaving a smaller number to breed. Nest-building was noted from mid April and the PBBS recorded just 37 pairs, a second consecutive year of low numbers.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
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## Willow warbler

### Common summer visitor

Two reported on 28<sup>th</sup> September were the latest ever record of this species at Paxton.

Willow warblers arrived from 29<sup>th</sup> March (MD/JLFP). The PBBS found 57 pairs breeding around the Pits, an overall increase, but the proportion on the reserve has fallen from 80% to 67% since 1998.

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## Goldcrest

### Winter visitor and localised breeder

There was little evidence of a winter influx with a peak flock of just six birds, on 2<sup>nd</sup> January (SM). A singing male and nest-building was observed from late March in Wray House Garden, a frequent nest site. However, we received no further reports and presume that the attempt was abandoned, although a sighting on 5<sup>th</sup> May near the Sailing Lake (PL) is intriguing.

While a breeding population in the village is presumed, we rarely have confirmation, so a family of four in Lakefield Avenue on 4<sup>th</sup> July (NP) was especially welcome.

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## Firecrest

### Scarce winter visitor

There were no overwintering records of this colourful sprite, but a report from Hayling Lake on 27<sup>th</sup> March and a sighting from the Moorings on 22<sup>nd</sup> April (BB) are enough to keep it in the *Report* this year.

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## Spotted flycatcher

### Scarce on passage; former breeder

The nationwide decline is evident at Paxton, with just five spring records. One near Paxton lock and two in the village at a previous nesting site provided hope of breeding, but there were no further sightings here. The Pits hosted just two birds, singles on 13<sup>th</sup> May and 8<sup>th</sup> June.

Typical for recent years, August saw a flurry of records, involving at least three family parties between 11<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup>.

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## Pied flycatcher

### Rare passage migrant, usually in spring

A female or juvenile was found on 19<sup>th</sup> August (DM/JM), catching insects from the top of Hayden Hide. It was still present the following afternoon. Although our records are not complete for this species, this is only the fifth sighting since 1990, and only the second autumn bird.

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## Long-tailed tit

### Abundant resident



Long-tailed tits are frequently seen in small flocks around the Pits or hanging precariously to garden feeders. The only counts we received were 45 around the

Pits on 10<sup>th</sup> January (RES) and 16 breeding pairs during the summer (PBBS). The population appears to be stable, despite the prolonged cold winter.

## Marsh tit

### Localised resident

Marsh tits were reported regularly from the Pits throughout the winter, a welcome recovery having pretty much lost the species a few years ago (there were just three records in 2001). Birds were regularly seen on the Visitors' Centre and Hayden Hide feeders during the winter, involving at least five birds, and one was seen sporadically near Pumphouse Pit.

Although two pairs were seen, near Heronry South and the River Viewpoint, until early May, there were no further records until 16<sup>th</sup> July (JW), after which they were seen more regularly. Previous experience shows they can be elusive when breeding, so we cannot rule it out.

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## Coal tit

### Localised resident

We received just a handful of records, suggesting coal tits were even more scarce than usual. Singles on 3<sup>rd</sup> September and 2<sup>nd</sup> October were the only ones around the Pits. Others were seen in the village during the autumn, but none between 5<sup>th</sup> November and 6<sup>th</sup> August (MD).

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## Blue tit

### Abundant resident

Flocking birds are a familiar sight, but rarely counted, so thanks for the sole winter report: 120 on 10<sup>th</sup> January (RES).

The breeding season brought 54 breeding pairs, including one nest resting on the lifebuoy next to Cloudy Pit! Many of those nesting on the nature reserve use nestboxes provided by industrious volunteers. Cleaning the nestboxes over the winter, they found that 59 of the 63 tit boxes were used in 2005. An additional 12 boxes were provided in 2006.

## Great tit

### Abundant resident

The PBBS provides the only record of great tit: 47 breeding pairs this year, the highest count yet.

## Nuthatch

### Scarce visitor

A probable sighting on the west side of Sailing Lake on 27<sup>th</sup> July (TP) was the only one of the year of a species that remains elusive at Paxton.

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## Treecreeper

### Localised resident

Breeding season reports are important in building up a picture of this species. We estimate four pairs around the Pits: next to Pumphouse, near Hayden Hide (fledging 2+ young), Haul Road and the Sanctuary.

## Golden oriole

### Rare spring visitor



This colourful and rare migrant tends to be seen by a lucky few: the chance sighting of a bird in flight. The last record was in June 1990. A male flying over the car park was seen on 3<sup>rd</sup> June by three Hertfordshire birders returning from Lakenheath Fen, Suffolk, where they had been watching golden orioles! Another bird was reported on 14<sup>th</sup> June, but was not confirmed.

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## Jay

### Localised resident

Seen regularly during the winter, peak day counts were ten at the Pits on 11<sup>th</sup> October and flocks of six in the village on 20<sup>th</sup> October (per TGG) and eight on 12<sup>th</sup> February (GAR). Breeding season records were scarce. We estimate three breeding pairs: near Sailing Lake (that fledged three young), Cloudy Pit and Heronry South. Additionally, jays are occasionally seen in village gardens.

## Magpie

### Abundant resident

Once again, the arable fields within the nature reserve pulled in the magpies, though a maximum count of nine was half that of last year. On two separate occasions, one was seen pecking for insects from the back of a muntjac deer! (MB/TGG/MH). The PBBS estimates 13 breeding pairs, similar to 2005, but no family parties were reported to us, so perhaps breeding success was low.

## Jackdaw

### Resident, more numerous in winter

Present among the crows roosting on Heronry South at dusk each winter's night, but we have no specific counts. Jackdaws are more frequent visitors to gardens in the village now, and we received several reports of birds that have learned to hang on seed feeders during winter and spring. The PBBS recorded only three pairs, surely an underestimate, but we have nothing better to go on!

## Rook

### Abundant resident

Rooks were again the dominant species in the evening corvid roost, but by mid December birds were actively renovating nests in the two rookeries around the Pits. Seen occasionally in the village, rooks came to food in a St James Road garden on several dates during the winter.

The Sailing Lake rookery held 71 nests and there were 31 in the Boughton Lodge colony. At 102 nests, this is the lowest breeding count since 2002.

## Carrion crow

### Abundant resident

The only count was from the Paxton Breeding Bird Survey, which recorded 12 pairs, a continued increase over the last five years. Carrion crows were regular visitors to the black-headed gull colony on Pumphouse Pit, taking eggs and undoubtedly causing the failure of many early nests. On the nature reserve, one was seen feeding on a frog (JS).



An interesting observation involved one repeatedly 'swinging' on overhead wires, close to a second upright bird. It did not flap to right itself, but hung upside-down before swinging upright effortlessly. It did this at least three times before both birds flew (JH/NP/JW).

## Raven\*

### Rare visitor

An entry in the *Report* for the fourth successive year. Two over Haul Road on 7<sup>th</sup> May (MBro) and a single circled over the nature reserve arable fields on 17<sup>th</sup> June (JH) before flying south to Hayling Pit (MD), then east towards Yelling.

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\*County rarity requiring submission to Cambridgeshire Bird Club Records Committee

## Starling

### Abundant resident

There was no winter roost in Hayling Pit's reedbed, but at least three pairs bred successfully around Sailing Lake, probably in the clubhouse roof, but many more undoubtedly nested in the village. Large flocks of juveniles were seen around the quarry in late summer, though most were probably not locally bred.

## House sparrow

### Abundant in village; scarce around Pits

House sparrow remains a common breeding bird in the village, though we have no idea of the size of the population. At the Pits, house sparrow records have become more frequent in recent years, with birds flying from Little Paxton and Diddington to gather food during the breeding season.

The PBBS recorded eight pairs: four around Hayling and Rudd Pits, and four around Sailing Lake. A male held territory near the Moorings in early March, but is not thought to have bred.

## Chaffinch

### Abundant resident

At 73 pairs, the breeding population was lower than last year, but the long-term trend is upward. It is a regular visitor to the bird tables on the reserve and in village gardens, but is most frequently heard calling from the more mature trees in the parish.

## Brambling

### Sporadic winter visitor

Another typical winter, with just a handful of records: two on 16<sup>th</sup> October (JW), three near A1 North on 27<sup>th</sup> November (JH/JW) and a male seen regularly in the Visitors' Centre garden and then Haul Road from 29<sup>th</sup> March to 9<sup>th</sup> April (JS). One reported on 24<sup>th</sup> April would be the latest spring record since 1979, but was not confirmed.

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## Greenfinch

### Abundant resident

Flocks of 100 around Heronry North and 30 on the Moorings (6<sup>th</sup> January, MB) were the only notable winter counts received, although double-figures were regularly hovering seed from the Visitors' Centre bird table.

20 breeding pairs around the Pits were estimated (PBBS), a stable population that is centred on the nature reserve.

## Goldfinch

### Localised resident

An abundance of teasel seeds provided ready snacks for goldfinches, bringing a dash of colour through the autumn. The largest count was 65 in Redland Meadow on 4<sup>th</sup> January (JH). Three breeding pairs were recorded on the reserve during spring (PBBS), with another gathering nest material close to the quarry plant.

## Siskin

### Localised winter visitor

After a blank in 2004/05, siskins were back on form, from the first on the early date of 17<sup>th</sup> September (JW). A flock around Sailing Lake from late October peaked at 60 on 8<sup>th</sup> January (JH). We rarely receive garden records, so one on 25<sup>th</sup> November (TGG) is unusual. The last confirmed record of winter was on 8<sup>th</sup> April (MD/ JW); a claim from the Haul Road on 7<sup>th</sup> May would be very late.

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## Linnet

### Localised breeder; common in winter



Large flocks around the quarry, A1 North and Meadow during the winter, but the peak was 150 near Rudd Pit on 20<sup>th</sup> January (MD). These dispersed by mid April and five pairs were recorded by the PBBS, with a juvenile spotted near the A1 Pits in early June (TB).

## Lesser redpoll

### Localised winter visitor

Another poor year for lesser redpolls, though up to five were seen on various dates between 23<sup>rd</sup> October and 25<sup>th</sup> April, the latest date on record.

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## Mealy redpoll

### Rare winter visitor

Six along the north side of Pumphouse Pit on 28<sup>th</sup> November were the only birds seen this year.

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## Bullfinch

### Common, but overlooked, resident

Many visitors commented on how abundant bullfinches were around the nature reserve during the winter, with little groups of up to 10 and a maximum count of 45 birds on 13<sup>th</sup> December (RES).

Bullfinches become more elusive once they pair up in late March, keeping in touch through quiet whistle contact calls. The PBBS found a stable population: 14 breeding pairs, the majority on the nature reserve, though pairs around A1 South, Island and Pumphouse Pits signal a spread to maturing scrub habitats to the north.

## Hawfinch

### Rare visitor



A new entry to the *Report* and addition to the Paxton List. In an autumn when hawfinches erupted in small numbers across the country, from Shetland to Scilly, a report near the Hayden Hide on 13<sup>th</sup> December was met with some scepticism, but when a local birder saw it on 20<sup>th</sup> (MH), it was greeted mostly with envy. It was never seen again, although one was reported feeding in a Southoe garden during the winter.

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## Yellowhammer

### Localised resident

The arable fields in the nature reserve proved attractive for the second year, pulling up to 60 birds into the stubble during December (KH/IJ/JLFP). Food was presumably exhausted by Christmas, because no large flocks were reported later in the winter, but two pairs here during the spring really do show the benefit of the habitat management.

This aided a small recovery around the Pits, with eight breeding pairs (PBBS).

## Reed bunting

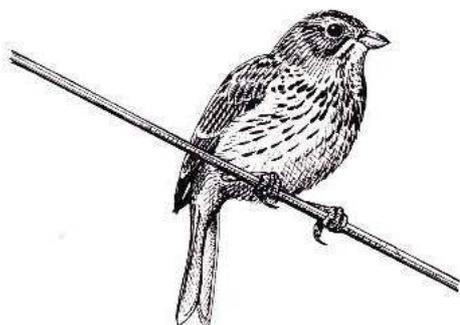
### Abundant resident

Through the second half of the winter, up to 10 reed buntings were regular if cautious visitors to the Visitors' Centre bird table, while they made occasional forays into the village. Up to 15 were in a Hayling Avenue garden, including one hanging on the seed-feeder for the first time (DFD/IKD).

43 breeding pairs (PBBS) is a great success story, a 50% increase since 1998, much better than the national population trend. Numbers on the nature reserve are increasing at an even faster rate: up 100%.

## Corn bunting

### Former breeder; scarce in winter



A winter flock of up to 50 birds on the northern edge of the quarry during January to March (JLFP) made occasional forays into the pits. One was recorded around Diddington Pit on several dates during April (and two were reported in May), but there was once again, no proven breeding.

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## Other species

Records of birds believed not to be of wild origin:

### Black swan

This Australasian swan is common in wildfowl collections and many live a feral existence on park lakes. One was present throughout the summer from 13<sup>th</sup> May (MD). It was joined by two others sporadically from 3<sup>rd</sup> June (JLFP) until 4<sup>th</sup> July.

### Wood duck

A male was present on Heronry South from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> October (TGG).

### Grey-headed gull

An adult, believed to be of this African species, was in the black-headed gull colony on 31<sup>st</sup> March and 3<sup>rd</sup> April (MLH).

### Java sparrow

Two individuals of this popular cage bird were on the Hayden Hide bird table on 9<sup>th</sup> July (per IL).

## **Mammals**

### **Brown hare**

Only recorded from the New Workings where there were many sightings of singles throughout the period. The only multiple counts were three together on 14<sup>th</sup> May (JH) and four on 2<sup>nd</sup> September (MD/JW).

### **Rabbit**

Commonly seen around the Pits complex.

### **Fox**

Seen regularly at the Pits and occasionally in the village with a maximum of three together. Cubs were often in evidence around Island and Pumphouse Pits in the spring from a den undoubtedly situated nearby.

### **Badger**

One, walking across the road north of Pumphouse Pit mid-morning, on 2<sup>nd</sup> August (JLFP) is the only sight record, although badgers are believed to live adjacent to the nature reserve too.

### **Noctule bat**

One hunted insects over Hayden Hide on the evening of 24<sup>th</sup> August (MAW). A large unidentified bat seen during the day on 31<sup>st</sup> March (MB) may also have been this species.

### **Pipistrelle bat sp.**

Two around Heronry South on 24<sup>th</sup> August, and singles in the village in August and September (MAW).

### **Common shrew**

Only one record received: a dead individual by Sailing Lake on 25<sup>th</sup> June (JH).

### **Water shrew**

One in the Hayling Ditch on 28<sup>th</sup> February (JS) was the only record.

### **Short-tailed field vole**

Several were noted on islands during conservation work parties: on Pumphouse Pit in November and Sailing Lake in January. One on the edge of A1 North in January is the only other record.

### **Harvest mouse**

One in the arable conservation area on 28<sup>th</sup> February (JS) is the only record, evidence that this scarce mammal remains in the area.

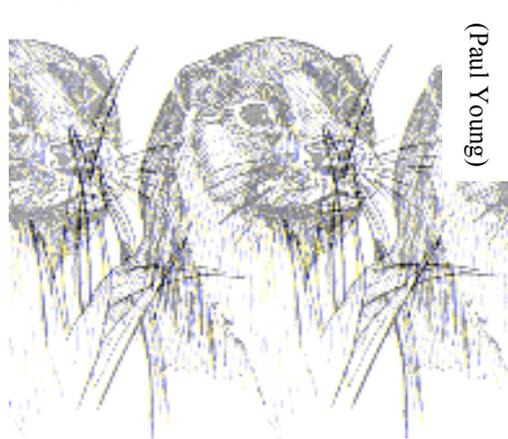
### **Hedgehog**

One crossed the road near the Visitors' Centre on 8<sup>th</sup> June (TGG). This was the observer's first sighting of this species at Paxton Pits in more than 25 years, giving an idea of how scarce it is here.

### **Mink**

Although there must be more than the two records that we received in 2006, we are sure that the decline continues. Is it just coincidence that the decline of the North American Mink at Paxton Pits coincides with the return of Otters?

### **Otter**



An excellent set of records (20 in total), proving that this species is now well established at Paxton Pits.

In autumn 2005, singles were seen on Heronry South on 27<sup>th</sup> November and 5<sup>th</sup> December; three on Heronry North on 17<sup>th</sup> December and singles at the river on 20<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> December. 2006 commenced with four together on Heronry South on 11<sup>th</sup>

January, the highest count yet, followed by singles there and Washout Pits on nine dates until 9<sup>th</sup> April. There were fewer records during the summer: two on 26<sup>th</sup> May on Heronry Lake with singles there on 21<sup>st</sup> June and 3<sup>rd</sup> July. Finally, a single was noted in The Meadow on 8<sup>th</sup> July.

## Mole



An elusive animal, and scarce at Paxton Pits, its presence is usually only detected by the appearance of molehills formed by their underground excavations. Eight molehills at the Moorings on 22<sup>nd</sup> January (JH) was the only record we received.

## Muntjac

One to five individuals were reported at various locations around the complex throughout the recording period.

## Weasel

11 records were received in 2006, including one seen killing a mouse and stashing it in a fallen log near the bridge to Kingfisher Hide on 23<sup>rd</sup> March (MD).

## Stoat

One at the New Workings on 5<sup>th</sup> November (NP); three in Diddington village on 25<sup>th</sup> June (JLFP) and one at Pumphouse Pit on 15<sup>th</sup> August (JLFP) were the only records we received.

## *Reptiles and amphibians*

### Common frog

One in Cloudy Pit on 29<sup>th</sup> September was late to hibernate, while two in the Hayling Ditch on 28<sup>th</sup> February (JS) were surprisingly early given the long winter; many tadpoles were found in the Sanctuary Pond on 14<sup>th</sup> June.

### Grass snake

We receive surprisingly few records of our only snake species, although they are occasionally reported from village gardens. Singles at Rudd Lake on 10<sup>th</sup> May, The Moorings on 21<sup>st</sup> June, Diddington Pit on 27<sup>th</sup> August, Cloudy Pit on 9<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> September.

### Great crested newt

This specially-protected species is known from only one part of the nature reserve, although full surveys have not been undertaken. Two females at the Visitors' Centre pond on 11<sup>th</sup> June (JH/IL) and at least one was there on 14<sup>th</sup> June (JS).

### Smooth newt

At least one in the Visitors' Centre pond on 3<sup>rd</sup> March (JS); 20 at the pools south of Cloudy Pit on 6<sup>th</sup> May (BA) and at least six there on 29<sup>th</sup> May (JH/MD).

## *Fish*

A 90 cm pike was seen in Pumphouse Pit on 17<sup>th</sup> May (JLFP), a **rudd** was removed from the Visitor Centre Pond on 14<sup>th</sup> June and a **spined loach** was seen in Cloudy Pit on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September (JS).

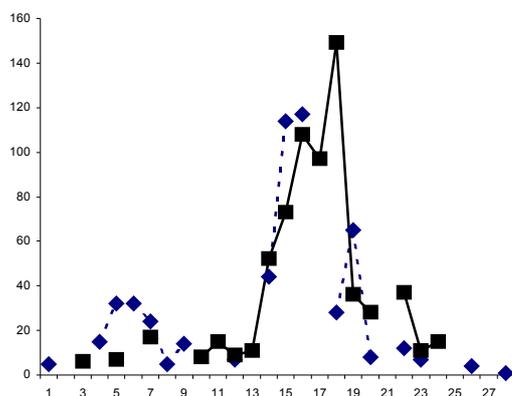
## Butterflies

### Butterfly monitoring at Paxton Pits

As with birds, we receive reports from visitors of the scarcer species, but previously we had no means of monitoring the fortunes of the more common species. In 2005, volunteers started to count butterfly numbers along a regular route (a transect) through the nature reserve: along the east bank of Heronry South, the north edge of Peter's Field and along the river as far as the south end of Island Pit. This transect is walked once a week between early April and the end of September, providing the weather conditions are suitable. The results contribute to the national monitoring scheme, co-ordinated by Butterfly Conservation.

Like the Paxton Breeding Bird Survey, the purpose is not to evaluate absolute numbers of butterflies, but to provide a trend over time. The graphs compare the average number of each species seen per visit *on which the species was recorded* (since the flight seasons for butterflies vary considerably between species).

The flight charts below combine results from the transect survey with other reports received.



### Number of butterflies recorded on Paxton Pits transect

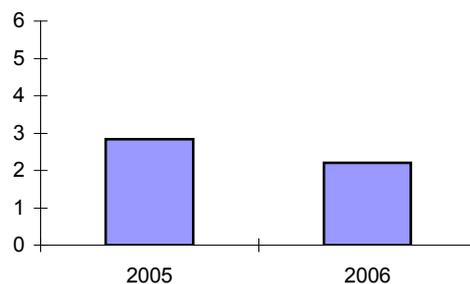
2005 = diamonds, 2006 = squares  
 Week 1 is first week of April  
 Week 28 is first week of October

After a poor start to 2006, midsummer counts were higher than in 2005, peaking a fortnight later in the third week of July.

### Top 10 species by abundance

|                     |                   |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Meadow brown     | 6. Red admiral    |
| 2. Gatekeeper       | 7. Speckled wood  |
| 3. Grn-veined white | 8. Peacock        |
| 4. Ringlet          | 9. Brimstone      |
| 5. Small white      | 10. Small skipper |

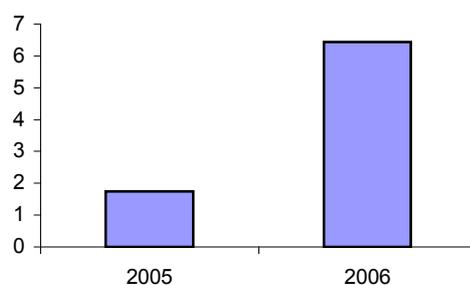
### Large white



Transect: one of the few species to be less abundant than in 2005. Occurred on less than one-third of visits, down by 50%.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

### Small white

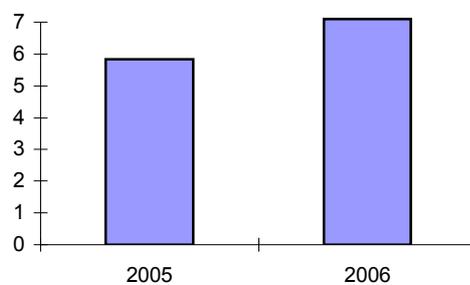


Transect: A marked increase, probably due to change of crops in Peter's Field. Found on almost twice as many visits as in 2005.

The first was seen on 31<sup>st</sup> March (MB), with a second generation from late June.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

### Green-veined white

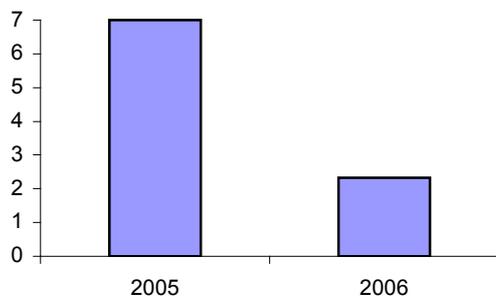


Transect: more abundant than last year, but occurring on the same proportion of visits.

The last of 2005 was seen on 9<sup>th</sup> October (KH/IJ), and the first of 2006 were seen on 22<sup>nd</sup> April (MS).

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

### Orange tip



Transect: scarcer than in 2005, but cold weather in April and wet weather in May is probably responsible, since this is always an early emerging species.

The first was seen on 17<sup>th</sup> April, with records over three weeks only.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

### Clouded yellow

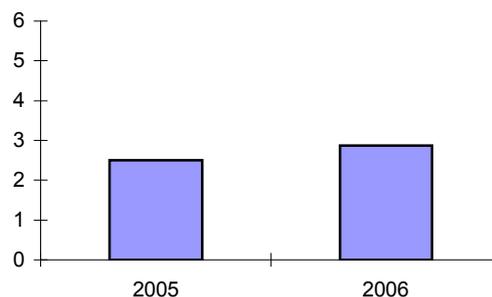
(Paul Young)



One at the New Workings on 4<sup>th</sup> September (JH) was the last of 2005. This year was equally poor for this species locally. Singles were reported on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> August (MAW), 3<sup>rd</sup> September and 9<sup>th</sup> September (JLFP).

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

### Brimstone

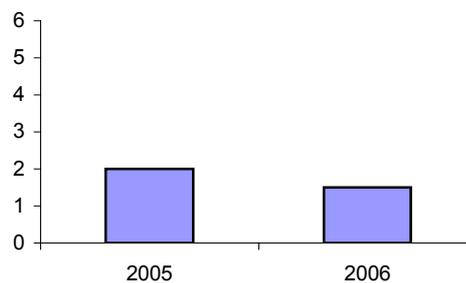


Transect: a slight increase in both the number of brimstones and the proportion of visits during which they were seen.

The last of 2005 was on 15<sup>th</sup> October (GAR) and the first of 2006 was seen on 23<sup>rd</sup> March (JLFP). Occasional records continued into September.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

### Small tortoiseshell



Transect: the graph is in line with other *ad hoc* comments that small torts seemed scarce this year. It seems remarkable that they were seen on only two survey visits.

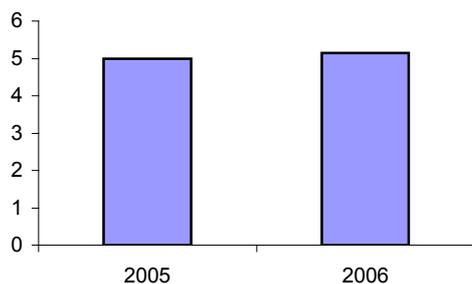
The last of 2005 was on 9<sup>th</sup> November (JLFP). The first of 2006 was on 31<sup>st</sup> March (MB), with a second generation in July; we received no records in August.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

### Camberwell beauty

A first for Paxton, and part of a late summer influx in southeast England: one at the south end of Hayling Pit on 11<sup>th</sup> September (DC). Although outside this recording period, it is included here for the sake of completeness.

## Peacock

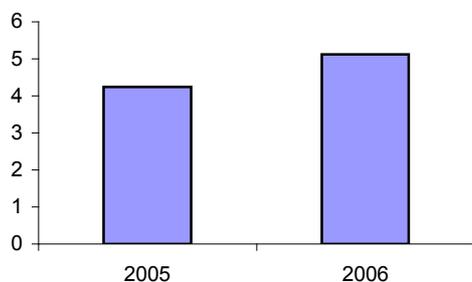


Transect: slightly more than in 2005, aided by a count of 27 on 22<sup>nd</sup> July, when the hemp agrimony along Southoe brook was in flower.

The last of 2005 was seen on 12<sup>th</sup> November (SM), indicative of the mild autumn. The first on the wing in 2006 was seen on 25<sup>th</sup> March. A count of 40 along the edge of a fallow field north of Diddington village on 23<sup>rd</sup> July (JH/NP) was one of the largest ever.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

## Red admiral



Transect: an increase on the previous year, with sightings on more than twice the number of visits (47% of the total). The first red admirals were seen on the transect on 11<sup>th</sup> June, three weeks earlier than in 2005, as expected for a migrant that depends on warm southerly winds.

The last of 2005 were on 1<sup>st</sup> November (JLFP). The first of 2006 was reported on 25<sup>th</sup> March, suggesting successful overwintering. The next, a presumed immigrant, was not until 3<sup>rd</sup> May and numbers increased later in the summer.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

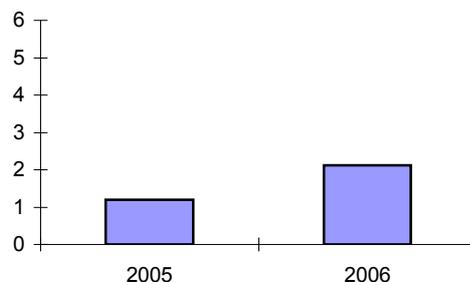
## Painted lady

Transect: after no records in 2005, the high summer temperatures helped to ensure that painted ladies were seen on almost one-third of survey visits this year.

Away from the transect, the first two were seen on the 9<sup>th</sup> June (MD). A good influx occurred and large numbers were present in gardens and around the Pits in July. The peak count was 72 on 25<sup>th</sup> July (JH/JLFP). Cooler, wet conditions in August meant fewer were seen, with just stragglers into September.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

## Comma



Transect: almost twice the number per visit in April and July, suggesting it was a good year for this delicate butterfly.

The last was seen on 9<sup>th</sup> October (KH/IJ) and the first of 2006 was on the wing on 4<sup>th</sup> April (MS).

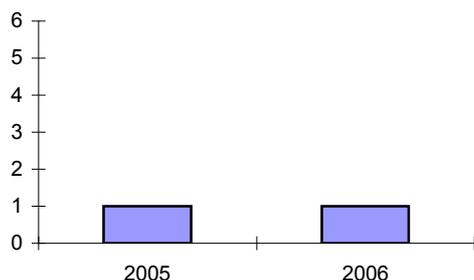
| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

## Silver-washed fritillary

Transect: one on 25<sup>th</sup> June (JH), between the reserve entrance and Hayden Hide, is probably the Pits' first for a species that does not usually reside any closer than Berkshire. Warm weather does aid their dispersal, and July 2006 brought a series of records from gardens in Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

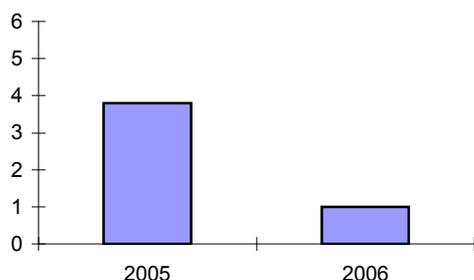
### Common blue



Transect: an unchanged abundance score for a butterfly that has become increasingly scarce at Paxton Pits over recent years.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

### Holly blue



Transect: recorded on only a single survey visit, making it scarcer than last year, probably due to poor weather during its short May flight period.

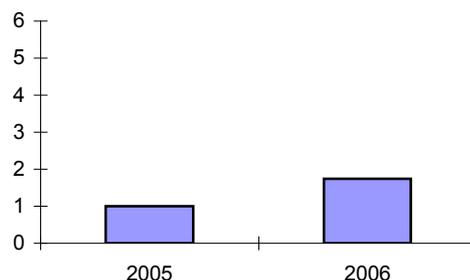
The first was seen on the 8<sup>th</sup> April and the last (of the first generation) on 7<sup>th</sup> May (DFD/IKD).

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

### Marbled white

Our concern, expressed last year, that low numbers in 2005 could mean that the colonisation of the Pits by this southern species would be short-lived may yet prove correct. Searches of their favoured area east of Heronry South found none, but singles were noted in early July near the Visitors' Centre and over the Moorings (JS), so there remains hope. None was found at their other local colony, St Neots railway embankment (SM).

### Brown argus



Transect: almost double the number on 2005, being recorded on a quarter of visits.

The first generation were flying on 28<sup>th</sup> May (JH/SH), with a single also noted on 6<sup>th</sup> June (FD). Second generation records were seen on 31<sup>st</sup> July (JT) and 6<sup>th</sup> August (MD/DH/MAW) and on dates into September, with multiples on each date.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

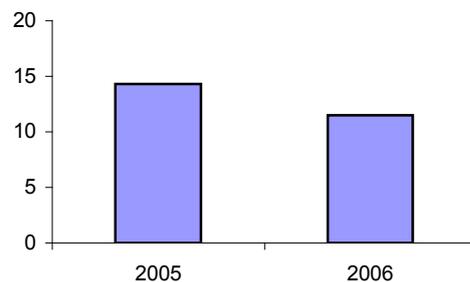
### Small copper

Transect: recorded only in May, but that was at least one more visit than in 2005.

We received only a handful of other records, in May and July, although more were seen from September's hatch.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

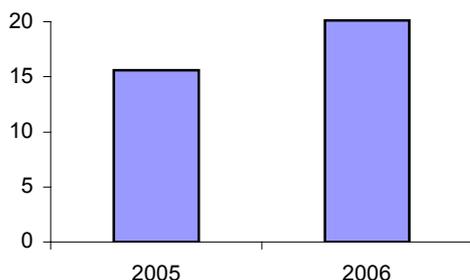
### Ringlet



Transect: even though it was recorded on more visits than in 2005, the average number of individuals was lower. The Moorings and Washout Pit are the most important parts of the transect for this species.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

### Meadow brown



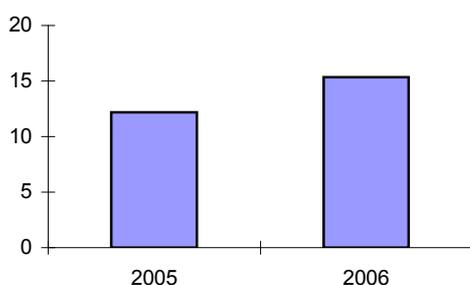
Transect: the most numerous species for the second consecutive year, these were abundant on grassland along the Moorings and the south end of Island Pit. They occurred on a greater proportion of visits than in 2005 too.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

### Small heath

One was reported to the Visitors' Centre on 5<sup>th</sup> October 2005 (observer unknown). It was surprisingly late in the year, but the only record for last year or this, suggesting that this species really is on the brink of local extinction.

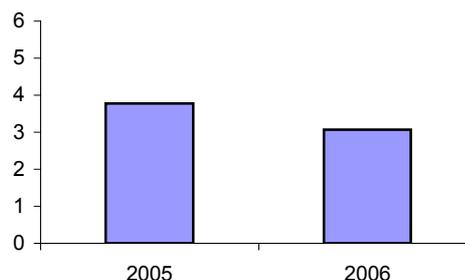
### Gatekeeper



Transect: another numerous species, with counts higher than in 2005. The stretch of the Ouse Valley Way that runs through the nature reserve is particularly good for this butterfly.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

### Speckled wood

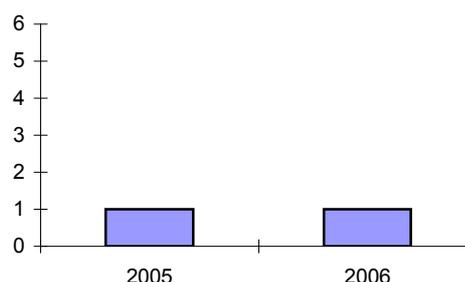


Transect: like the ringlet, with which it shares very similar habitat at Paxton, counts were down despite the proportion of visits during which it was recorded increasing to 76%.

The first was on the wing on 27<sup>th</sup> April (TB), with small numbers throughout the summer into September.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

### Large skipper

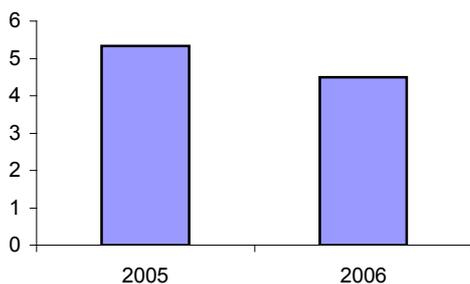


Transect: recorded infrequently during the survey, with just one sighting in each year.

Late second-generation records in 2005 were on 28<sup>th</sup> September (KH/IJ) and 5<sup>th</sup> October. The first of 2006 was on 10<sup>th</sup> June (JH), with very few records in total.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

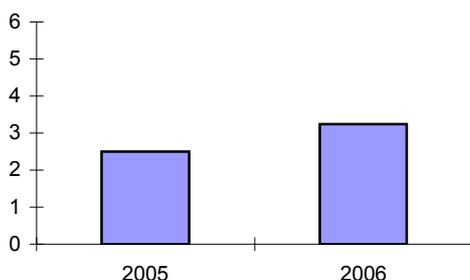
## Small skipper



Transect: numbers were down this year, even though there was an increase in the proportion of visits on which small skippers was seen.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

## Essex skipper



Transect: an increase in numbers even though they were not seen on any more visits than in 2005.

| S | O | N | D | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

## Moths

A total of 207 species were recorded in 2006. 16 of these were new to Paxton Pits, of which five were new to Huntingdonshire (marked \*)! Barred carpet\*, confused, ear moth, heath rivulet\*, larch pug, lesser common rustic, ruddy carpet, silky wainscot, small grass emerald\*, treble brown spot, triple-spotted clay, *ancylis badiana*, *callopietria latreillei*\*, *chrysocrambus linetella*\*, *elegia similella*\* and *phyllonorycter strigulatella*.

In contrast to last year, 2006 saw large numbers of our most obvious moth

species, the migratory, day-flying **silver-y**. It was also a good year for the **hummingbird hawkmoth**. Recorded on seven dates at Paxton Pits between 13<sup>th</sup> June and 21<sup>st</sup> August, including three together on 5<sup>th</sup> August. We also received sightings from two village gardens late in the summer, but there must surely have been more.

A full list of moths recorded at the Pits can be found at [www.paxton-pits.org.uk](http://www.paxton-pits.org.uk).

## Dragonflies and damselflies

### Emperor dragonfly

Several females were still busy ovipositing in Weedy Pit as late as 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2005 (AD). This, our largest dragonfly, was a regular sight around the pits in small numbers between June and the end of August 2006.

### Migrant hawker

A typical dragonfly of late summer and early autumn, the last of 2005 was seen on 27<sup>th</sup> October. The cold, wet and generally unsettled weather in August 2006 meant that the usual large assemblies of newly-emerged individuals were not observed. Few counts at the northern end of the complex, for example, reached double figures at this time (MAW), but better weather in September improved their fortunes.

### Southern hawker

The last of 2005 was seen on 23<sup>rd</sup> October (JLFP). The first three of 2006 were seen on 3<sup>rd</sup> July (MAW). Small numbers of this often inquisitive dragonfly were present around the Pits into September.

### Brown hawker

There were still several around on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2005 (AD). The first of 2006 was seen on 25<sup>th</sup> June. Singles were observed hunting for insects into the twilight at New Workings and Heronry South on warm evenings in August (MAW).

### Common darter

The last record of 2005 (indeed, of any dragonfly) was three on the 9<sup>th</sup> November (JLFP). The first of 2006 was seen on 14<sup>th</sup> June (FD/IJ). It was a common sight throughout the complex until the end of the recording period.

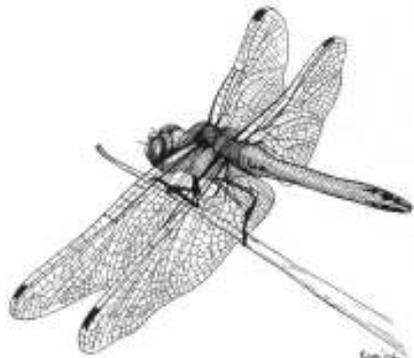
### Ruddy darter

There were still many around on 17<sup>th</sup> September (JW), but we received no later records in 2005. The first of 2006 was seen on 15<sup>th</sup> July and small numbers were seen into September.

### Red-veined darter

Following the first record of this vagrant from the continent at Paxton Pits in June 2005, there came a series of sightings from the New Workings in summer 2006. 3+ were seen on the 3<sup>rd</sup> June; two on 1<sup>st</sup> July and two males on 29<sup>th</sup> July (JLFP).

(Rob Banbury)



Unprecedented numbers of this attractive dragonfly were seen in the UK in summer 2006, with notable numbers at sites in Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire. The red-veined darter looks set to become a permanent fixture here as copulation and oviposting (egg laying) was witnessed at many of the sites they were seen, though not at Paxton Pits.

### Scarce chaser

The first of 2006 was seen on 17<sup>th</sup> May (SG). The only other record we received was 10 on 28<sup>th</sup> May (JH/SH).

### Red-eyed damselfly

The first of 2006 was seen on 24<sup>th</sup> May. Red-eyed damselflies were then present on several pits within the complex into August.

### Small red-eyed damselfly

This species has colonised many parts of southern Britain from the continent over the last few years and its spread has been impressive to say the least. Having been discovered in Cloudy Pit for the first time in 2004, it was recorded here again in 2006, from 23<sup>rd</sup> July (JH) to 16<sup>th</sup> August (IJ) and a peak of 12 (all males) on 6<sup>th</sup> August (DH/MAW). They must surely be in the shallows of some other pits, so look carefully in 2007!

### Large red damselfly

Only three records received were: all in May, with the first noted on 13<sup>th</sup> (SM).

### White-legged damselfly

The first sighting of 2006 was several on 2<sup>nd</sup> June (SM). The only other records we received were eight roosting in a nettle bed in the vicinity of the river viewpoint on the evening of 14<sup>th</sup> July (MAW) and 10 on the 6<sup>th</sup> August (DH/MAW).

### Variable damselfly

One seen on 24<sup>th</sup> May (IJ) was the only record that we received, but hopefully there were more.

### Azure damselfly

The first was seen on 17<sup>th</sup> May (SG).

### Common blue damselfly

The first of 2006 were seen on the 10<sup>th</sup> May (AD). An estimate of 300 individuals was made in one small area in the vicinity of the River Viewpoint on 14<sup>th</sup> July (MAW).

### Blue-tailed damselfly

The first of 2006 was seen on 10<sup>th</sup> May (AD). A count of 50 around the River Viewpoint was made on 14<sup>th</sup> July (MAW).

### Emerald damselfly

The first of 2006 was seen on 29<sup>th</sup> May on Rudd Lake (PR) with the only other report of two on Cloudy Pit on 6<sup>th</sup> August (DH/MAW).

### **Banded demoiselle**

The first of 2006 were seen on 10<sup>th</sup> May (AD). In a 'roost gathering' on a nettle bed by the River Viewpoint on 14<sup>th</sup> July around 40 individuals were very approachable while they entered a torpid state for the night with several white-legged damselflies (MAW). The last of 2006 was seen on 6<sup>th</sup> August (JH).

### **Black-tailed skimmer**

The first was seen on 25<sup>th</sup> May (JLFP); the species was seen in good numbers around the Pits into August.

### **Broad-bodied chaser**

Small numbers were seen between 13<sup>th</sup> May and 12<sup>th</sup> July (SM).

### **Four-spotted chaser**

The first was seen on 11<sup>th</sup> May (JLFP).

## ***Grasshoppers and crickets***

### **House cricket**

This recently established species has now reached Paxton Pits. At least three called from temporary islands in Pumphouse Pit on 8<sup>th</sup> August, with another calling from the quarry on 22<sup>nd</sup> August (MAW).

### **Roesel's bush cricket**

The 'electricity pylon'-like buzz of this rapidly expanding species is now a common sound at the Pits from July to October. Large numbers were located in August and September. Counts around the northern pits included c60 on 20<sup>th</sup> August and 8<sup>th</sup> September (MAW).

### **Dark bush cricket**

Very common around the complex, with its short chirping an accompaniment to evening walks around the pits in summer and early autumn. 80 were counted between Kingfisher Hide and the Visitors' Centre on 24<sup>th</sup> August (MAW).

### **Field grasshopper**

Abundant in grassy areas around the Pits.

### **Long-winged conehead**

The long-winged conehead continues its expansion north and west in the UK. The last record in 2005 was on 15<sup>th</sup> October (GR). In 2006, long-winged coneheads were located in the fallow field at the north end of Diddington village, with a peak count of 15 on 8<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> August. Small numbers were located in grassland around the quarry, and investigation of the eastern edge of the large meadow between the Little Paxton and the A1 revealed 6+ on 1<sup>st</sup> September (MAW).

### **Lesser marsh grasshopper**

Recorded in the fallow field at the north end of Diddington village.

### **Meadow grasshopper**

Good numbers were present in the grassland areas around the Pits.

### **Slender groundhopper**

One was located in the meadow at the north end of Diddington village on 13<sup>th</sup> August (MAW).

### **Common groundhopper**

Several were seen on the exposed islands of Pumphouse Pit on 8<sup>th</sup> August (MAW).

## ***Other invertebrates***

A survey of beetles in four grassland areas at the south end of the Pits found over 6,700 individuals of 57 species (LB). One species, *Pterostichus cupreus*, accounted for over 60% of the total. One nationally scarce species *Panagaeus bipustulatus* (thought to occur in 31-100 ten-kilometre squares) was confirmed, while another four were provisionally identified: *Amara lucida*, *Bembidion gilvipes*, *Pterostichus anthracinus* and *P. longicollis*.

Four species of ladybird were recorded in July: 2-spot, 7-spot 14-spot and 24-spot (SM). Hornets have suffered a marked decline across the UK so it is encouraging to receive several records, including dozens commuting to a nest on the riverside in September 2005 (JH).

## Plants

Three new additions were made to the list of plants found at Paxton Pits, bringing the total to 373 species.

A single plant of **Meadow saxifrage** (*Saxifraga granulata*) was found not far from the Visitors' Centre. It is a plant of damp grassland, but its location on the side of a bank is not its ideal habitat, so we are hoping it can seed itself to better site or it may prove short lived. The nearest known colony of Meadow Saxifrage is on St Neots Common.

A colony of **Enchanter's nightshade** (*Circaea lutetiana*) has been found near Hayling Pit. It is probably well established but had not been recorded before, and proves the need for more observational recording.

We were interested to see what grew on the excavated soil that was removed during the Great Meadow grassland restoration, beside the river. Among the more expected arable flowers was a single plant of **Treacle mustard** (*Erysimum cheiranthoides*). This annual can be locally common on disturbed ground, particularly on sandy soils and Fenland peat, but is not common around here, so we would welcome any information about other sightings in the area.

Several attractive plants that a few years ago had only one or two specimens are successfully seeding themselves into a small colony. Around the sailing lake area **Vervain** (*Verbena officinalis*) and **Common gromwell** (*Lithospermum officinale*) have both produced a number of plants this year. Elsewhere, a single plant of **Stinking hellebore** (*Helleborus foetidus*) is probably a garden escape (it is native on chalkland in southern England) as is **Skullcap** (*Scutellaria galericulata*), a plant of wet places, but both have developed a patch of seedlings, having found favourable conditions.

There are, however, a number of alien plants here that are also spreading very successfully, but are definitely not welcome. **Australian swamp stonecrop**

(*Crassula helmsii*) and **Spotted medick** (*Medicago arabica*) are the worst of these, being aggressive species that push out the native plants. **Crown vetch** (*Securigera varia*) and **Bastard cabbage** (*Rapistrum rugosum*) are two plants that are encroaching on the reserve, and could prove a problem in the future.

One of the most notable plants on the nature reserve is **Great dodder** (*Cuscuta europaea*), which grows in the appropriately named Dodder Fen, south of The Friends' River Viewpoint. It can be a difficult plant to study. It is parasitic on nettles and is usually impossible to spot until it flowers, and then requires much searching through the chest-high foliage. It is an annual that has to time its germination to the young growth of nettles. We had suspected that it could have more than one generation in a year, as in previous years we have found it still flowering in winter on nettles that had resprouted after the flowered stems had collapsed. This year there was localised (and unplanned) disturbance to the nettles in Dodder Fen in midsummer, as earthmoving machinery forged a trackway. The result was that Great dodder was found in full flower on mature undisturbed nettles, while only a metre away there were flowerless clumps on the trampled nettles. This lends support to the management regime that has been in place for many years, of cutting patches of nettles in winter to cause disturbance and encourage the Dodder.

Thanks to Jocelyn Gale for providing the information on flowering plants.



Garlic mustard, one of the species to feature in Paxton Pits Flowering Plant List. (Paul Young)

A full list of the flowering plants recorded at the Pits is available from the Visitors' Centre, and at [www.paxton-pits.org.uk](http://www.paxton-pits.org.uk).

## 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 2005 or an earlier one for 2006, please let us know!

|                      | Paxton 2006 | Paxton earliest  | Cambs earliest  |
|----------------------|-------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Little ringed plover | 24 March    | 12 Mar 2000      | 4 Mar 2003      |
| Sand martin          | 25 March    | 2 Mar 1997       | 27 Feb 1994     |
| Chiffchaff           | 22 March*   | 2 Mar 2003*      | overwinters     |
| Swallow              | 28 March    | 14 Mar 2001      | 7 Mar 1983      |
| Willow warbler       | 29 March    | 9 Mar 1997       | 9 Mar 1997      |
| Wheatear             | 29 March    | 11 Mar 1996      | 7 Mar 1977/1989 |
| Blackcap             | 31 March*   | 17 Mar 2004*     | overwinters     |
| Yellow wagtail       | 31 March    | 27 Mar 2005      | 16 Mar 1992     |
| House martin         | 2 April     | 4 Mar 2001       | 4 Mar 2001      |
| Common tern          | 3 April     | 3 Apr 1999/2006  | 20 Mar 1997     |
| Sedge warbler        | 8 April     | 25 Mar 2002      | 25 Mar 2002     |
| Nightingale          | 10 April    | 4 Apr 1999/2002  | 4 Apr 1999/2002 |
| Cuckoo               | 15 April    | 3 Apr 2005       | 8 Mar 1989      |
| Whitethroat          | 16 April    | 3 Apr 2002       | 29 Mar 1998     |
| Hobby                | 17 April    | 17 Apr 2004/2006 | 31 Mar 1985     |
| Garden warbler       | 21 April    | 4 Apr 1997       | 28 Mar 1999     |
| Turtle dove          | 21 April    | 12 Apr 1998      | 4 Apr 1982      |
| Lesser whitethroat   | 22 April    | 15 Apr 2001      | 31 Mar 1987     |
| Reed warbler         | 22 April    | 7 Apr 2001       | 7 Apr 2001      |
| Swift                | 25 April    | 19 Apr 1996      | 3 April 2002    |

\* excludes records of overwintering birds. No date is given for county records of blackcap and chiffchaff since so many now overwinter here.

|                      | Paxton 2005  | Paxton latest    | Cambs latest       |
|----------------------|--------------|------------------|--------------------|
| Cuckoo               | 3 July       | 31 Aug 2003      | 4 Nov 1957         |
| Nightingale          | 30 July      | 25 Aug 2001      | 6 Sep 1996         |
| Common tern          | 29 August    | 24 Oct 2004      | 7 Nov 2005*        |
| Lesser whitethroat   | 10 September | 20 Sep 2001      | 25 Nov 2003*       |
| Little ringed plover | 16 September | 23 Sep 2002      | 29 Oct 1973        |
| Sedge warbler        | 17 September | 19 Sep 1993      | 28 Oct 1979*       |
| Turtle dove          | 19 September | 25 Sep 1980      | 16 Nov 1957        |
| Reed warbler         | 24 September | 28 Sep 2002/2003 | 21 Nov 2003*       |
| Swift                | 25 September | 15 Oct 1961      | 8 Nov 2001         |
| Whitethroat          | 25 September | 30 Oct 2004      | 22 Nov 2002*       |
| Willow warbler       | 28 September | 28 Sep 2005      | 24 Oct 2000*       |
| Hobby                | 28 September | 28 Oct 2002      | 2 Nov 1992/2001/02 |
| Garden warbler       | 2 October    | 2 Oct 2005       | 21 Nov 2003*       |
| Sand martin          | 2 October    | 20 Oct 2000      | 17 Nov 1968        |
| Yellow wagtail       | 9 October    | 13 Oct 1999      | 5 Dec 1982         |
| Swallow              | 9 October    | 27 Oct 1961      | 3 Dec 1953         |
| Wheatear             | 17 October   | 18 Oct 2003      | 24 Nov 1957        |
| Chiffchaff           | 21 October*  | overwinters      | overwinters        |
| Blackcap             | 21 October*  | 21 Oct 2005      | overwinters        |
| House martin         | 5 November   | 5 Nov 2005       | 17 Dec 1977        |

## Growing Paxton Pits Nature Reserve

Ray Matthews\*

2006 is set to be a landmark year in the development of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve, as a major planning deal, supported by The Friends of Paxton Pits, will significantly increase the habitat for wildlife and access for people.

The Reserve was opened in 1989 as a direct result of community support and volunteer assistance to Huntingdonshire District Council (HDC). From the start, the Local Nature Reserve, leased from local mineral companies, was managed as a partnership between HDC and volunteers, setting a pattern for the community involvement that is the hallmark of the Reserve today.

HDC bravely took the opportunity to purchase the northern part of the Reserve when it came on to the market in 1994. The purchase included the Moorings, and adjacent meadow, and the island in the River Great Ouse. Again with great foresight, HDC extended the Reserve in 2002 by purchasing Dodder Fen (already managed as part of the Reserve), the land now farmed as arable, and Great Meadow. Originating from an abortive Friends/St Neots Bird and Wildlife Club project to purchase some of the land, this major acquisition brought the Reserve to its current size of *ca.* 78 ha (193 acre). The Friends contributed around £10,000 to this purchase and subsequent management costs.

By 2003 the success of the Reserve was unqualified. Attracting over 100,000 visitors each year (and rising) and with The Friends support group now over 1000 strong, the Reserve was an established and important local amenity. It was also firmly on the tourist map for those seeking out countryside and wildlife for their enjoyment.

But with this success came concern for the future. A glance at plans and strategies being developed at Local, County and Regional levels left no doubt that our area would see huge developments in housing, industry and transport in the next 20 years. The associated population increase would bring massive pressure on the wildlife of our part of the Ouse Valley, and on the Nature Reserve in particular. It was right for The Friends to take the long-term view and advocate extending the Reserve, so that this special place for wildlife and people would have the capacity to provide for both in years to come.

The opportunity to put the case for an extended Reserve arose in March 2003 when Aggregate Industries (AI), the company which works the quarry to the north of the Reserve, applied for permission to extend quarrying operations to extract the remaining gravel deposits within the Paxton Pit complex. The Friends welcomed the application to extend the quarry because AI proposed that virtually the entire newly dug area would be dedicated to a conservation after-use. In particular, the inclusion of substantial areas of reedbed would significantly contribute to national and local Biodiversity Action Plan targets for this high priority habitat.

However, we were deeply concerned that the proposals did not include conservation management provisions for the new pits. The Friends was equally concerned about the future of areas such as Heronry North, Island Pit, and Pumphouse Pit. Although extraction has long since finished, these areas are still within the quarry and thus outside the Reserve, even though they are of proven wildlife value, designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) or County Wildlife Site, and highly valued by local birdwatchers and walkers for their abundance of wildlife. Indeed, 60% of the SSSI is currently *outside* the Reserve!

These concerns led The Friends to comment on the application, as part of the public consultation, by outlining a vision for the future of the Paxton Pits complex. The intention of The Friends' response was to contribute to the debate by doing some 'horizon-setting'. We

### The growing Reserve

|      |                    |
|------|--------------------|
| 1989 | 57 ha (142 acres)  |
| 1994 | 64 ha (158 acres)  |
| 2002 | 78 ha (193 acres)  |
| 2016 | 285 ha (704 acres) |

asked the question, “What **could** be achieved at Paxton for the benefit of the wider local community and for the Ouse Valley’s wildlife, against the background of the massive urban development predicted for our region?”.

The Friends’ response, *Paxton Pits - the Future?*, was submitted to Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC, the authority responsible for determining the quarry application). It proposed that future conservation management of most of the areas within the existing and extended quarry should be secured by bringing these areas into an extended Paxton Pits Nature Reserve with Local Nature Reserve status, as quarrying is completed.

The Friends also proposed that the ‘zoning’ successfully applied to areas of the complex previously released from quarrying operations, be extended. The conservation-based amenity zone would consist of the current nature reserve extended northwards up to and including Pumphouse Pit. The water-activities recreation zone, for more formal recreation (sailing, fishing, etc), would be close to the A1, extending the north-south axis of the existing water sports recreation zone. A network of nature trails, hides and viewpoints, and a circular bridle-way/cycle track, would provide access to both zones.

Publicising The Friends’ vision proved a successful strategy. Several key organisations, including English Nature (EN), the RSPB, and The Wildlife Trust, and around 100 private individuals, included support for extending the Reserve as part of their comments on AI’s application, for areas outside those preferred by government for mineral extraction.

In a detailed and far-sighted response to the application and the public consultation (October 2003), CCC concluded that “exceptional community benefits would need to be demonstrated ... to justify such a major departure to the County’s Development Plan”. The planners suggested that a proposal incorporating and extending the Nature Reserve would unlock greater community benefits by maximising opportunities for increased biodiversity and public access.

Aggregate Industries convened a Working Group to develop its proposals. Besides AI and its consultants, Entec, the group included representatives from CCC, EN, The Friends and the RSPB. There followed 18 months of detailed discussion, planning, negotiation and drafting, culminating in submission of AI’s revised proposals in June 2005.

Through The Friends, the volunteer input into developing plans for restoration and future management of the Reserve extension was enormous, especially via the thousands of bird records gathered through the WeBS (Wetland Bird Survey) and PBBS (Paxton Breeding Bird Survey) monitoring schemes, and from observations submitted through the website.





How long before bearded tits move into the new Paxton Pits reedbed? (*Rob Banbury*)

The revised proposals contain detailed proposals to include some of the areas to be worked, and many of the existing Pits and grassland, into a vastly extended Paxton Pits Nature Reserve. Over the next ten years, the Reserve would grow to a massive 285 ha (704 acre), i.e. 3.7 times its current size. It would be 2.9 miles long (north to south) and include new lakes for wintering wildfowl, islands for breeding waders, species-rich grassland (20 ha, 50 acres) for flowers and invertebrates, scrub for nightingales (25 ha, 62 acres), marshy margins, wet woodland, and a 24 ha (60 acre) reedbed large enough to hold bearded tits and breeding bitterns. The increased footpath network would bring the total in the complex to 27 km, and a major new access feature would be a circular 8.4 km cycleway passing through the Reserve for about 40% of its length.

During the public consultation on the revised plans in summer 2005 The Friends promoted the benefits of the plan through special publications and the website. The revised plans certainly met with a good measure of public approval; 326 letters to CCC supported the plan and just 3 opposed it. HDC was a key consultee. Having objected to the March 2003 application, its Development Control Panel decided in November 2005 not to object to the revised proposals and to enter into negotiation with AI to become the manager of the extended Reserve.

The watershed decision for the future of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve came in March 2006. CCC resolved to refer AI's application to the Secretary of State, noting that it was minded to grant planning permission subject to conditions. Witnessed by a large contingent of supporters in the public gallery, CCC Councillors were convinced of the extent and quality of the community benefit on offer, and by the level of support through presentations from The Friends, from County, District and Parish Councillors, and all those letters.

In May 2006, the Secretary of State gave CCC the freedom to make the final decision. Before this happens, a Section 106 Agreement (S106) dealing with legal and financial aspects of the mineral extraction and land restoration plan needs to be negotiated. Crucially, it will include agreements on leases for the extension to the Reserve (expected to be at least 80 years) and provision for management support from the Company (*e.g.* staff costs and provision of a vehicle). The S106 will be an agreement between AI, CCC and HDC. The decision of HDC's Cabinet, in September 2006, to take on the management of the extended Reserve was therefore of vital importance. The Councillors' support for the extension was very encouraging. Cabinet member Councillor Nick Guyatt is quoted in the local paper: "In terms of significance to the District, this is as important as the Great Fen Project".

All who enjoy Paxton Pits' wildlife will agree with this sentiment. The Reserve is at a crucial point in its development. By the end of 2006, the Reserve's future as a regional and national attraction should be secure, benefiting both people and wildlife, and demonstrating that community action can have a profound influence on the quality of our local environment.

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\* Ray Matthews is Chairman of The Friends of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve

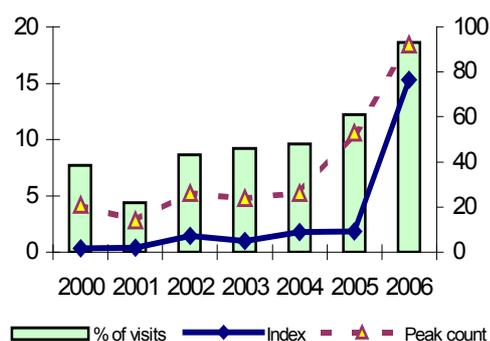
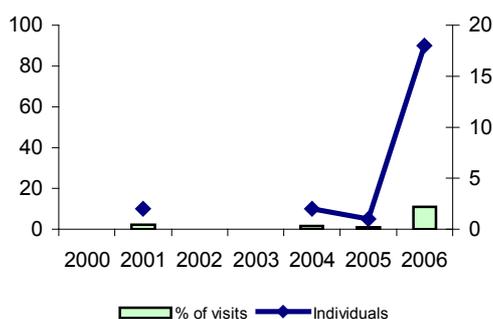
## Waders galore: spring 2006 is best ever at Paxton Pits

Julian Hughes

The individual species entries earlier in the report shows that there was strong wader passage through Paxton Pits during spring 2006, but what was the cause and how good was it relative to other years?

The first question is quite straightforward to answer: low water levels and large areas of exposed mud provided rich feeding grounds for migratory birds. Following one of the driest winters on record, Bardon Aggregates pumped water from one pit in order to ensure that the adjacent quarry was not flooded as the last sand and gravel was excavated. The pit had been full of water for around 10 years, since quarrying was completed there and this is the first time that it had been drained. Indeed, by late summer, it was almost completely arid.

The second question requires careful comparison with records collated for the *Birds of Paxton Pits* since 2000. The graphs below provide that comparison. ‘Spring’ passage was taken as the period from 1<sup>st</sup> March to 15<sup>th</sup> June. This is considered to be reasonable based on average passage period, although some species were seen on dates in January and February, and it is possible that a few sightings in early June could relate to failed breeders heading south again.

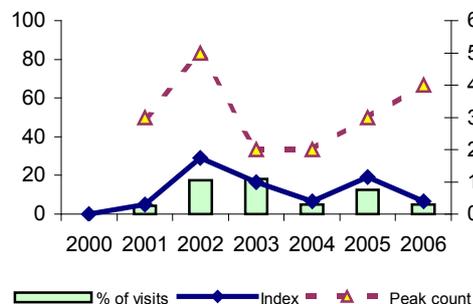
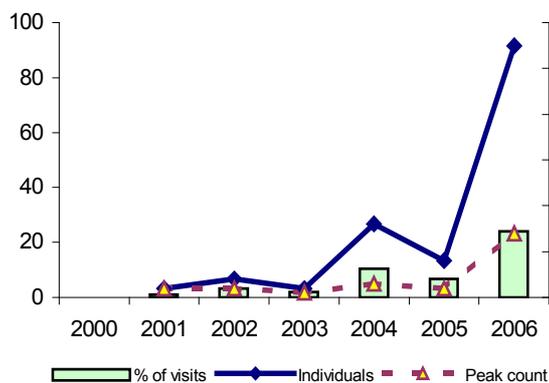


### Grey plover

- recorded on 11% of visits (average <1%)
- 18 individuals in 2006, compared to no more than 2 in any year during 2000-05.

### Dunlin

- recorded on 93% of visits (average 43%)
- peak count of 92 birds (average 27 birds)
- number of birds uncertain, but cumulative index is eight times the previous best

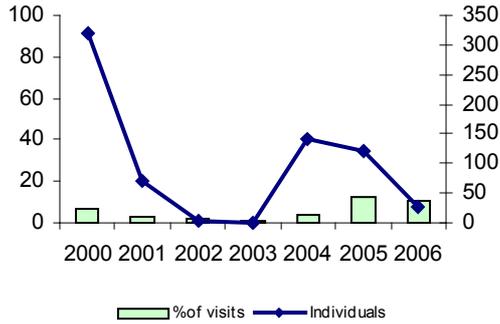


### Sanderling

- recorded on 24% of visits (average 4%)
- peak count of 14 birds (average <2 birds)
- 55 individuals (average 5), almost 3.5 times the previous best during 2000-05.

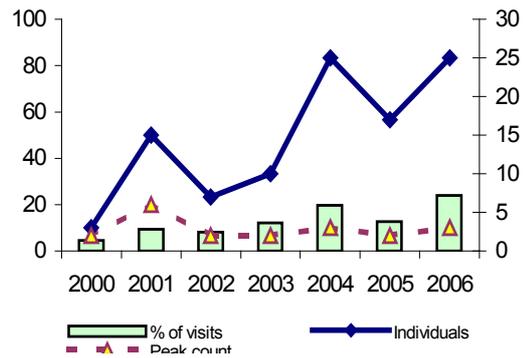
### Ruff

- recorded on 5% of visits (average 10%)
- peak count of 4 birds (average <3 birds)
- number of birds uncertain in some years, but cumulative total is <25% that of 2002.



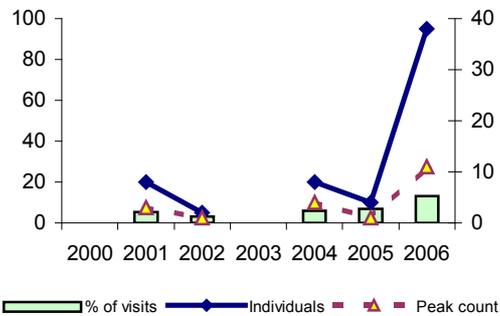
**Black-tailed godwit**

- recorded on 11% of visits (average 5%)
- 26 individuals, with no large flocks, making it a poor year compared to four of the previous six years



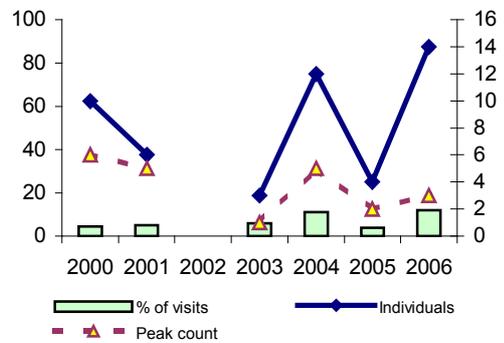
**Common sandpiper**

- recorded on 24% of visits (average 11%)
- peak count of 3 birds (same as average)
- 25 individuals recorded



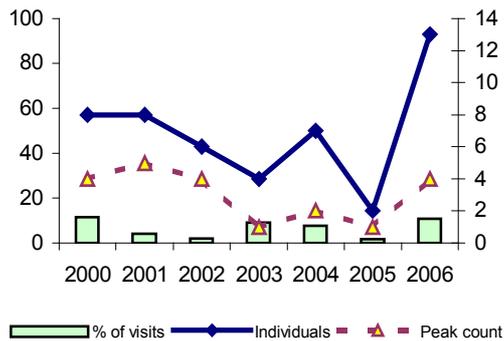
**Bar-tailed godwit**

- recorded on 13% of visits (average 3.5%)
- peak count of 11 birds (average <2)
- 38 individuals, almost five times the previous highest during 2000-05.



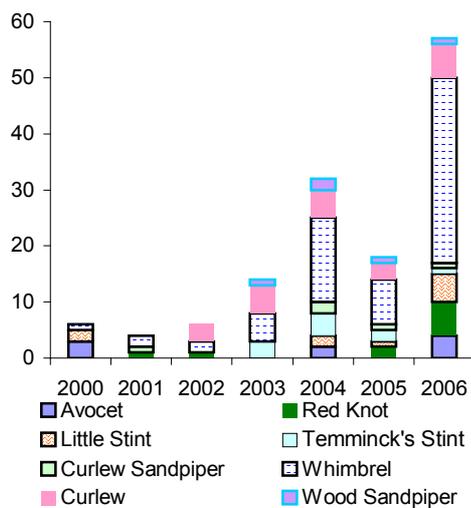
**Turnstone**

- recorded on 12% of visits (average 5%)
- peak count of 3 birds (same as average)
- 14 individuals, two more than previous best



**Greenshank**

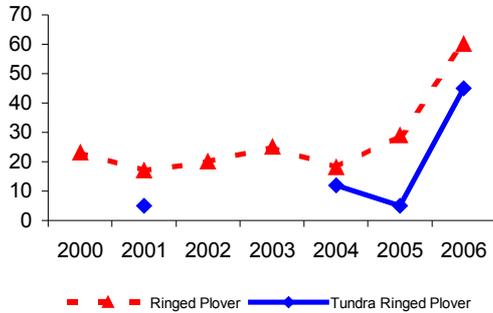
- recorded on 11% of visits (average 6%)
- peak count of 4 birds (average 3 birds)
- 13 individuals, 60% higher than the previous best during 2000-05.



**Other species**

- Larger numbers of avocet, knot, little stint, whimbrel and curlew than in any year during 2000-05.

The graphs illustrate that it was a particularly extraordinary spring for numbers of grey plover, sanderling, dunlin, bar-tailed godwit and greenshank. By contrast it was a poor year for ruff, while common sandpiper and turnstone have been gradually increasing in occurrence in recent years, and spring 2006 continued that trend.



The species above are all purely migratory at Paxton Pits, breeding at least several hundred miles to the north. A small number of wader species breed on islands specially managed for them by Bardon Aggregates and RSPB volunteers, yet even some of individuals of these species will be on migration too, heading farther north. One such species is the ringed plover, of which a small number of pairs breed. We do not know how many ringed plovers pass through the Pits each spring, but based on the peak

counts it must include hundreds of birds in some years, and certainly includes passage migrants. Spring 2006 was particularly good for ringed plovers, with a peak of 60 birds, twice the number of 2005. In most years, among the more abundant *hiaticula* birds are a number of smaller, darker individuals of the *tundrae* race that breed far to the north, such as in Spitsbergen. Our records for this race are undoubtedly incomplete, either because not all observers are familiar with the subtle plumage differences or this race is not reported separately. This year, numbers of *tundrae* birds exceeded any other year at Paxton, with a peak count of 45 birds.

Of course, to fully understand the reasons for the differences in the number of waders that occur each spring would require a complex assessment of weather conditions and timing of bird movements across a broad front, both the good weather that might push birds north from their wintering grounds in southern Europe and west Africa and poor weather that causes birds to halt their passage, as well as winds that cause a greater number to move over land.

Perhaps this spring was no different to any other in terms of the number of waders moving north down the Ouse Valley, but the difference is that there was now reason for birds to stop. The availability of suitable feeding and safe roosting areas are important factors in encouraging birds to stay, and it is notable that during spring 2006 many individual birds stayed for several hours or even days, in contrast to observations in previous years that waders frequently stop for only for a few minutes before moving on. Certainly, with water levels maintained high deliberately at Grafham Water to secure water supplies through a year of drought, Paxton Pits provided the only suitable wader habitat in this part of the valley. There are, of course, years when superficially similar habitat (shallow water and lots of open mud) is available in pits where extraction has been completed but waders have not been as abundant as in 2006. One can only speculate as to whether the ten years of inundation by water before it was drained made it a particularly good foraging area.

What is certain is that 2006 saw probably the best ever spring passage of waders at Paxton Pits, and this continued in the autumn as birds returned from the moors and tundra of the north. For those who were fortunate to visit the northern Pits during this period, every day brought the potential for new birds, and although there were no rarities, 27 species were recorded here (woodcock around Heronry South brought the Pits' tally to 28). But we knew we must enjoy it while it lasts. By next spring, depending on winter rainfall, the pit may well be full of water once more, and we will talk of the days it was like having an estuary on the doorstep of Little Paxton.

## Research projects at Paxton Pits in 2005

Gemma French, Mary Beth Charles, Nina Lyman and Ruth Hanniffy

As well as being an important recreational area for local residents and attraction for local and visiting naturalists, Paxton Pits is also an outdoor laboratory for students. Local primary and secondary schools visit the Nature Reserve each year as part of geography and biology studies, but in 2005, the reserve hosted five graduates undertaking fieldwork for their MSc. This work has enabled the volunteers and staff at Paxton Pits to better understand what makes the reserve tick. Copies of their full dissertations are available from the Visitors' Centre.

### The benefits of beetle banks to *Carabidae* beetles – Gemma French

An area of arable land was brought into the nature reserve in 2001, managed in a non-intensive way to benefit wildlife through the implementation of beetle banks, conservation headlands and wild bird cover areas, all elements of agri-environment schemes encouraged by government to increase biodiversity in the UK. The study assessed the value of these features at Paxton Pits Nature Reserve on the *Carabidae* populations by collecting them in pitfall traps from each agri-feature and within the arable fields. Traps were also set at a gradient from the beetle banks into the centre of the fields to provide data on community structure. Traps were sampled once every seven days for eight weeks between 18 May and 6 July 2005.

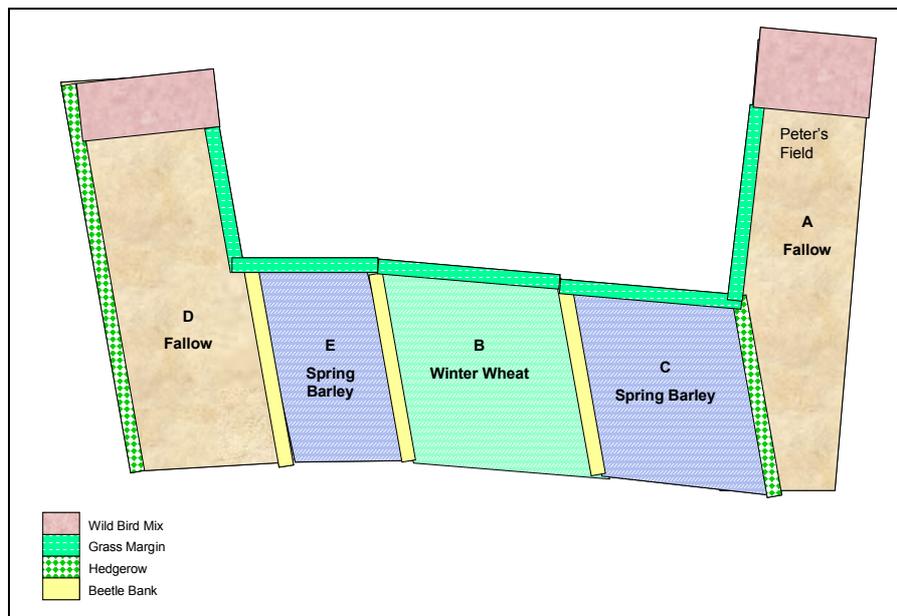
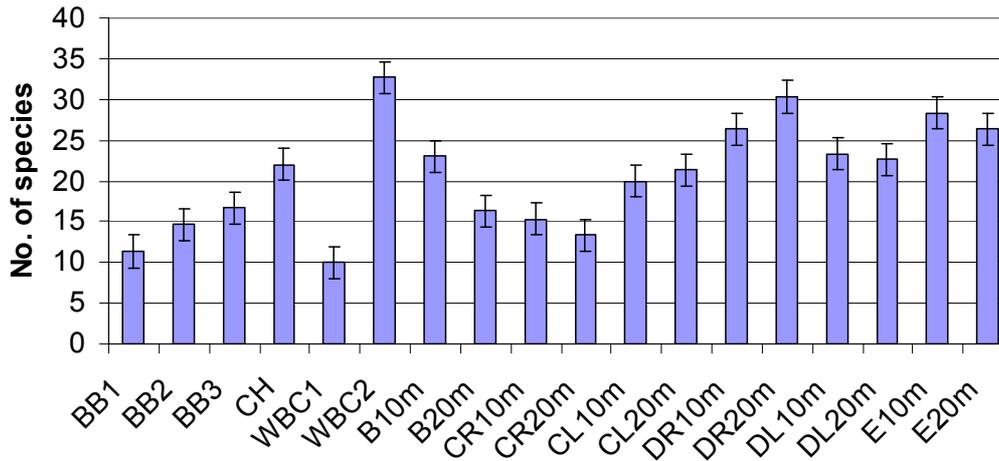


Fig.1. Crop rotation, Paxton Pits Nature reserve arable area, spring/summer 2005

Ground beetles are classed as the family Carabidae; there are over 25,000 species worldwide and over 250 species in Britain that occupy a variety of habitats from woodland and grassland to wetland and coast. They are primarily found on the ground and many species are flightless. During the day, Carabids are found in sheltered and moist areas such as in leaf litter and under rocks and logs. In winter they hibernate under bark, in hollow stems or in the base of grass tussocks. Some may even create an oval burrow in the substrate for overwintering. Ground beetles will emerge in spring and some will migrate. They vary in size from 3mm to 36mm and have a variety of colours.

A total of 2722 individuals were collected and 45 species identified. This provides baseline data of what species were found on the reserve and their relative abundance. Three individuals of two nationally scarce species were found - *Harpalus ardosiacus* and *Chlaenius nigricornis*; these are thought to be vagrants.



**Fig. 2. Mean number of individuals found at each site over the 8 week period.**

BB=beetle banks (1-3), CH=conservation headland, WBC=wild bird cover (1-2)

B=field B (10 and 20 metres from BB1);

CR=field C (10 and 20 metres from BB1), CL=field C (10 and 20 metres from BB2);

DR=field D (10 and 20 metres from BB2), DL=field D (10 and 20 metres from BB3),

E=field E (10 and 20 metres from BB3).

The six most common species were *Pterostichus cupreus*, *Harpalus rufipes*, *Nebria brevicollis*, *Harpalus aenus*, *Amara ovata* and *Pterostichus madidus*, making up 83% of the total. The most dominant of the species was *P. cupreus* making up 36%. The area with the highest abundance of carabids and highest number of species was the two-year old Wild Bird Cover, whereas the one-year old Wild Bird Cover (WBC1) had the lowest diversity and abundance, less even than the middle of the fields.

The beetle banks held the least number of species and the least number of individuals (with the exception of WBC1), whereas the adjacent fields maintained a wide variety of species and a high abundance, suggesting that although the beetle banks provide an overwintering refuge, they do not harbour many species all year round but provide the source of species to the surrounding environment. The results suggested that the beetle banks had the desired effect of increasing carabid beetle diversity and abundance in the arable land but they do not necessarily support high diversities and numbers of species themselves. Certain species showed significant association with particular habitat types.

Overall, the study suggests that the use of artificial grass strips in fields has a significantly positive affect on the abundance and diversity of *Carabidae* present at Paxton Pits Nature Reserve. It also enables species to overwinter that may not otherwise survive in the field itself. Cereal fields are prone to drastic soil disturbance, seasonal changes in soil surface microclimate and availability of prey as the crop grows and so providing a refuge such as the beetle banks allows the population of carabids to continue even when there is disturbance to their habitats.

### Availability of invertebrate prey to Nightingales - Mary Beth Charles

Although many aspects of nightingale biology, habitat preferences and song characteristics are well established, other areas have yet to be studied fully. With regard to diet, few in-depth studies have been undertaken, so it is not known whether prey type and abundance is a factor that limits the number of territories. Although it is not proven, it has been speculated that, since the nightingales are often very vocal at night, they probably do not feed at night. In the UK, feeding usually occurs on bare ground under thickets and in overgrown ditches. This is usually in less dense areas within the same coppice that is also used for nesting. Studies conducted in traditional woodland habitat in Kent showed nightingales fed almost exclusively on the woodland floor where there was also little or no ground vegetation.



The nightingale's diet includes primarily worms and insects, with spiders, fruit and berries. Faecal samples indicate that beetles, especially weevils, and wood ants were the most frequent items for fledglings and adults, as well as spiders and lepidoptera larvae.

At Paxton Pits nature reserve, six nightingale territories in scrub were selected for invertebrate sampling. This was to investigate what invertebrate prey is available to nightingales within their singing territories. Observations suggested that the nightingales preferred certain areas on the ground (within the cover of vegetation) more than others. Each individual had two or three areas on the ground where they consistently chose to go.

Based on this information, pitfall traps were placed in three areas within each territory as it was assumed that this is where the nightingales were foraging. Three pitfall traps were also laid in open spaces around the perimeter of the territories, where nightingales are thought not to feed normally, to determine whether there was a difference in the species available and the composition of the invertebrate community. Pitfall traps were constructed from simple plastic cups. Holes were dug into the ground, where the cup was placed. Pitfall traps function by simply catching any insects that fall into them as they are moving over the ground. Thirty-six daytime and thirty-six night time samples were collected for four days a week over six weeks. Half of these samples were collected from territory interiors, half from territory exteriors. Results showed invertebrates to be more abundant within territories and during night hours. Capture rates of the sixteen most abundant families were significantly different across sites, suggesting that nightingales may be generalist eaters. Two families, *Carabidae* (ground beetles) and *Staphylinidae* (rove beetles), were consistently common across the six territories; however, further research is required to determine whether they provide a key contribution to the nightingale diet.

Since higher proportions of invertebrates were captured within territories, management suggestions centre on maintaining the scrub habitat within nightingale territories. Scrub management in the form of coppicing should continue at Paxton Pits to promote heavy ground vegetation within nightingale territories and in turn promote a rich and diverse invertebrate community.

The results showed higher invertebrate abundance *within* singing territories than in adjacent habitat. This may be due to the fact that there were different ground microclimates between interior and exterior locations. Within territories, the climate was cooler since low-lying vegetation shaded most of the ground. The areas adjacent to territories were sparsely vegetated (except for very short grasses and similar flora) and in direct sunlight, providing a much warmer ground climate. If microclimate is not a factor, higher abundance of invertebrates within territories may be due to the cover that the understorey vegetation provides.

### Aquatic Invertebrates in the Paxton Pits SSSI – Nina Lyman

There is little information concerning aquatic invertebrates or their relationship with wildfowl in the lakes at Paxton Pits. There is also little information on the water quality. The aims of this study were to

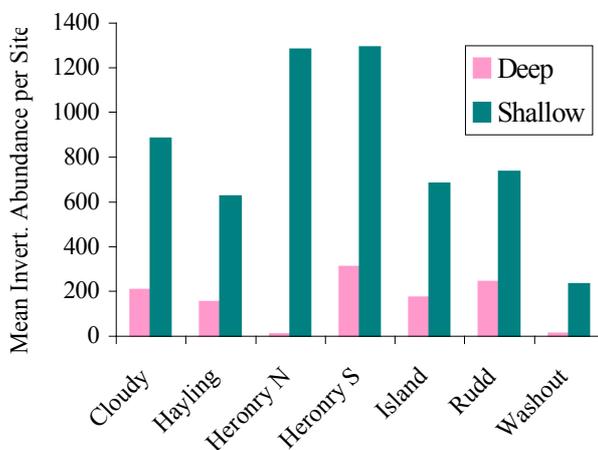
- 1) provide baseline data of freshwater aquatic invertebrates present in the SSSI-designated lakes at Paxton Pits Nature Reserve
- 2) measure factors influencing the diversity and evenness of freshwater aquatic invertebrates
- 3) measure water quality (with the use of biotic indices) and its influence on aquatic invertebrates
- 4) understand how aquatic invertebrates influence the abundance of wildfowl.

Invertebrates were sampled from Cloudy, Hayling, Rudd and Heronry South lakes within Paxton Pits Nature Reserve. Heronry North, Washout and Island lakes were also sampled as these are within the Site of Special Scientific Interest and therefore are of conservation priority.

Invertebrates were sampled from 6<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> June 2005. To represent the entire invertebrate community of each lake, samples were taken from the middle as well as the edges. In total, six sites per lake, three around the edge (shallow water) and three in the middle (deep water) were selected. Benthic macro-invertebrates were collected using a standard pond net after the sediment and vegetation was agitated using the edge of the net. The net was swept in one motion from the surface of the water, throughout the water column, and then scraped along the top layer of sediment. This action repeated for 30 seconds was sufficient to collect an adequately sized sample. Eight sweeps were taken in total in the same place of each chosen site. Where water was deep and the pond net could not reach the bottom of the lake, it was swept throughout the water column to a depth of about two metres for 30 seconds.

The vegetation survey was conducted midway through sampling on 15<sup>th</sup> June. Percentage cover was estimated for each lake under the categories submerged, emergent, floating and overhanging to quantify how uniform in species each lake was.

A total of 20,339 individuals in 49 taxa were collected during the study period. Cloudy Lake held the greatest diversity of aquatic invertebrates (from 37 families), followed by Hayling, Rudd, Heronry South, Heronry North, Washout and Island Pit (27 families). The majority of lakes studied at Paxton Pits show high levels of invertebrate diversity and evenness, with the two Heronry Lakes holding the greatest number of invertebrates in shallow water. Total chironomid (water mite) abundances are exceptionally high in Heronry South, more than twice the number in Heronry North or any of the other lakes sampled.



**Fig. 3. Mean invertebrate abundance per site for shallow and deep water samples for each lake**

Results show the abundance of invertebrates to be greatest at the edges of the lake in shallower water. This is not surprising as the edge of lakes, known as the littoral zone, are typically nutrient rich and dominated by aquatic vegetation. This zone is where coarse particulate organic matter from shoreline trees accumulates, adding to the large quantities produced by aquatic vegetation. The littoral zone therefore supports the greatest abundance of invertebrates as organic matter provides food and shelter for them.

Heronry North and South have the highest abundance of invertebrates in shallow water. It is possible that the high guano input from the large population of Cormorants nesting in the overhanging willows is increasing the organic content of the water and reducing levels of dissolved oxygen. Low oxygen is, however, unlikely to be a problem because Heronry South also has the highest total abundance and a relatively diverse community of invertebrates. Sufficient oxygen must therefore be present to support them.

Analysis shows Hayling and Rudd Pits to have the most pollution-sensitive invertebrates of the lakes sampled. Cloudy Pit and Heronry North and South were shown to be relatively similar in quality. Washout and Island Pits had slightly fewer pollution-sensitive invertebrates. The overall quality ratings of the lakes sampled range from 7 (Hayling and Rudd) to 5.5 (Island). All lakes sampled in the study are therefore of excellent water quality.

Of the six factors included in the analysis, only gravel extraction technique was shown to influence the diversity of invertebrates. Lakes extracted using the old technique of wet dredging (Hayling, Rudd, Cloudy, Heronry South) are 1.7 times more diverse in invertebrates than those extracted using wet suction (Heronry North), and that lakes extracted using the newer technique of dry digging (Washout and Island Pits) were 1.1 times more diverse than wet suction. Wet dredging was 1.5 times more diverse in invertebrates than dry digging. Extraction type influences depth, sediment type, age and jaggedness, and thus the vegetation that colonises the lake.

Invertebrate diversity and evenness do not appear dependent on water quality for high diversity or evenness, but it is important to remember that all the lakes sampled had good water quality.

Correlations for both breeding and over-wintering wildfowl show that invertebrate abundance and not diversity or evenness appear to influence the number of wildfowl in each lake. The numbers of wildfowl broods are significantly correlated with the number of molluscs: Hayling Pit has the highest total number; Heronry South and North also show relatively high mollusc abundance. There was a significant correlation between total summer invertebrate abundance and Tufted Duck counts the previous winter. There was no significant correlation between the number of wildfowl broods and total chironomid abundance for each lake.

To improve invertebrate abundance and diversity, and increase the availability of invertebrates to wildfowl, it may be useful to increase the amount of shallow water. Gently sloping shores are attractive to invertebrates as well as wildfowl.

The invertebrate survey also identified a nationally scarce species of diving beetle *Ilybius fenestratus* (family Dytiscidae) in Rudd Pit, Cloudy Pit and Heronry North. It will be important to conduct autecological research in order to determine the importance of particular habitat features. It is vital that the species is included in the Management Plan for Paxton Pits Nature Reserve. The distribution and abundance of *Ilybius fenestratus* should be monitored annually to determine the success of any management actions or the effects of natural changes. Any newly discovered sites could then be managed alongside existing sites to maintain a viable population and possibly expand the range.

### Density and Habitat Preferences of Small Mammals – Ruth Hanniffy

A study was carried out to determine the density and habitat preferences of six species of small mammals at Paxton Pits. Small mammals tend towards different habitats to fulfil their dietary and nesting requirements. As a result certain species often co-exist: *Apodemus sylvaticus* (Wood mouse), *Clethrionomys glareolus* (Bank vole), *Sorex araneus* (Common shrew) and *Sorex minutus* (Pygmy shrew) inhabit broadleaved and mixed woodland in the south of England, while *Microtus agrestis* (Short-tailed field vole) and *Micromys minutus* (Harvest mouse) favour rough grassland.

Harvest mice are notoriously difficult to trap and as a result are highly under-recorded. However, distribution has most certainly reduced over the past 30 years so that populations are now confined to the south and east of England. Harvest mice are indicative of the health of fields and hedgerows and loss of this species around the countryside has been attributed to changes in agricultural practises over the last three decades.

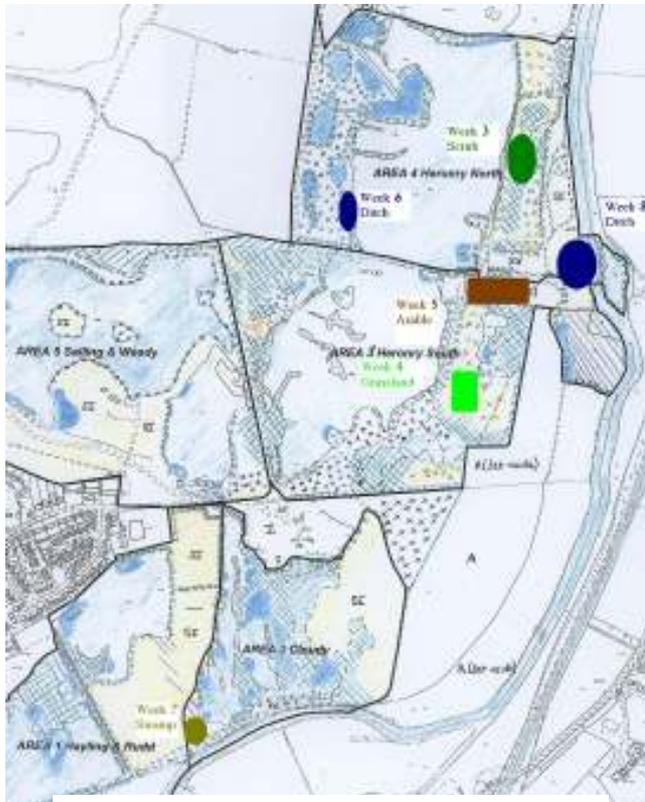
Capture-mark-recapture using Longworth trapping was carried out over consecutive weeks on five habitat types. Vegetation at each site from week one to eight was recorded to identify the dominant species in a five-metre radius.

Densities varied greatly with habitat type, however these differences were for the most part not statistically significant. Wood mice were particularly abundant in scrub-grassland borders, highly grazed grassland and in the field margins of arable land. Bank voles, as the name implies, were most plentiful on banks of lakes and ditches, of both high and low vegetative cover. They were also abundant in swamp and marginal habitat and in the field margins of arable land. Common shrews inhabited rough grassland and marshy grassland, which presumably supports many invertebrate communities. They were also present in the meadow hedge that runs over a ditch and the swamp habitat. Pygmy shrews also inhabited the grassland-marsh of the meadow. Only two short-tailed field voles were caught in swamp

habitat and recaptured in the nearby scrub-grassland.

At Paxton Pits, the number of resident and visiting raptors is extensive. Records of raptors place the majority on the north section of the Pits, away from the nature reserve where the study was carried out. Kestrels and occasionally barn owls hunt over the arable land, where the abundance of Wood mice and Bank voles is extremely high. Small mammals will only be available to most raptors on the larger arable fields. However, at least two pairs of tawny owls nest on the reserve and will hunt over woodland and scrub.

The role of management and deer and rabbit browsing on various parts of the reserve was determined and the relationships between these factors and the diversity of small mammal species was considered. Possibilities for future study on the reserve and recommendations for future management were made.



**Fig.4. Habitat locations where small mammal sampling was undertaken**



## ***Friends of Paxton Pits are making Paxton Pits Nature Reserve a better place for wildlife and people***

### **During the last year we have, with your help...**

- Contributed funds (£2000) towards the project to restore *Great Meadow* to wet grassland, to support wild flowers, birds and invertebrates
- Funded work (£1000) to complete the hedgerow restoration programme around *Hayling Lake*, allowing native shrubs and trees to reappear
- Bought equipment (£1000) to improve the operation of the Visitors' Centre
- Funded new signs (£2900) giving Reserve information and nature trail maps at the four entrances
- Worked with a range of agencies on a plan that will massively increase the size of the Reserve
- Run the weekend volunteer habitat management programme in collaboration with the RSPB
- Hosted visits by organised groups – 40 totalling 1000+ visitors in 2005
- Encouraged and supported volunteering on the Reserve, equivalent to over five members of paid staff during 2005
- Supported the Voluntary Warden service in recruiting and retaining members
- Rented three moorings on the Great Ouse that form The Friends' *River Viewpoint*

### **Our plans for the next few years include...**

- Working with Huntingdonshire District Council and other organisations to implement a major expansion of the Reserve
- Helping to fund habitat restoration and improvement, e.g. wet grassland, scrub, hedgerows, ponds
- Organising and supporting events on the Reserve, e.g. *Nightingale Festival Week, Family Fun Day*
- Funding the *River Viewpoint*, bird seed for feeders and Visitors' Centre improvements
- Promoting the Reserve in the local community through Guided Walks, the Visitors' Centre, talks and the media
- Expanding volunteer involvement in all activities needed to maintain and develop the Reserve
- Funding further phases of the programme to restore native scrub for nightingales by removing invasive Turkey oaks

**Membership costs just £8 for a family or £4 for a single person.**

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***With your help, we can make Paxton Pits Nature Reserve an even better place for wildlife and people***

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- *The Kingfisher* newsletter, three times a year
- Free social and events programmes
- Half price hot drinks in the Visitors' Centre
- Car sticker
- Membership card

And, above all, the satisfaction of directly contributing to the future of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve and its wildlife.

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**Yes**, I want to help conserve the wildlife of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve

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Our annual subscription      £.....\*      \*Please make cheques payable to The  
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Please send your completed form and subscription to the Treasurer:  
John Knight, 15 Park Avenue, Little Paxton, Cambridgeshire PE19 6PB

## St Neots Bird Report

The Friends of Sudbury Meadow produces an annual Bird Report, covering St Neots, Eaton Ford, Eaton Socon and Eynesbury. Please send bird records to Alison Pearson, 4 Kipling Place, Eaton Ford, St Neots PE19 7RG. E-mail: [alison.pearson@dpconsultant.co.uk](mailto:alison.pearson@dpconsultant.co.uk). The 2005 report is available from Alison Pearson, price £1 (please make cheques payable to the Friends of Sudbury Meadow). The 2006 report should be available in early spring 2007.

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Please send all records of birds recorded between September 2006 and December 2007 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 Visitors' Centre.

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**Find out more about the wildlife of Paxton Pits by visiting our website: [www.paxton-pits.org.uk](http://www.paxton-pits.org.uk)**

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