



BIRDS of PAXTON PITS

Autumn and winter 2000

Spring and summer 2001

Includes Little Paxton village and surrounding area

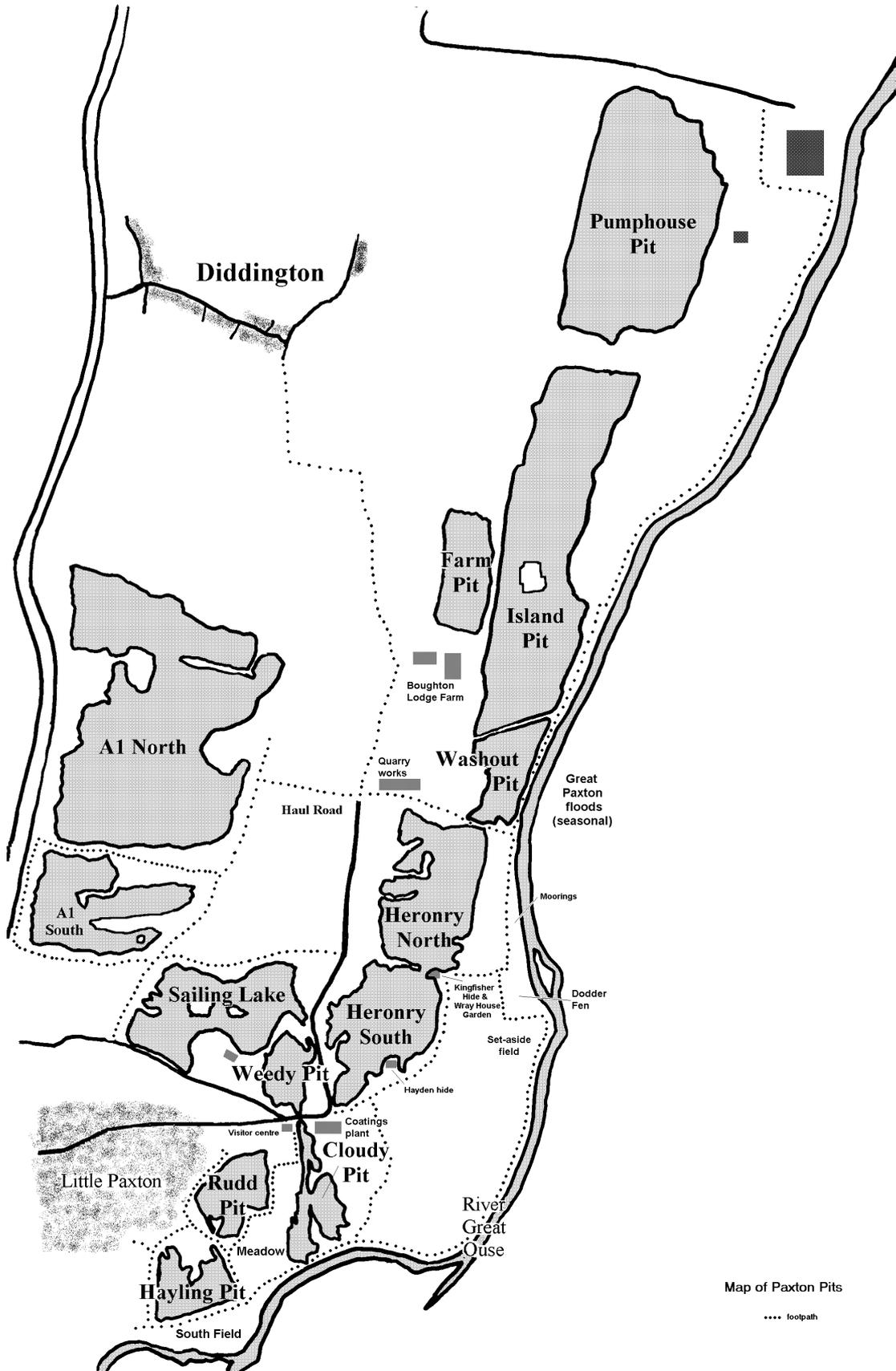
Birds of Paxton Pits, Little Paxton village and surrounding area

1st September 2000 to 31st August 2001

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Map of Paxton Pits

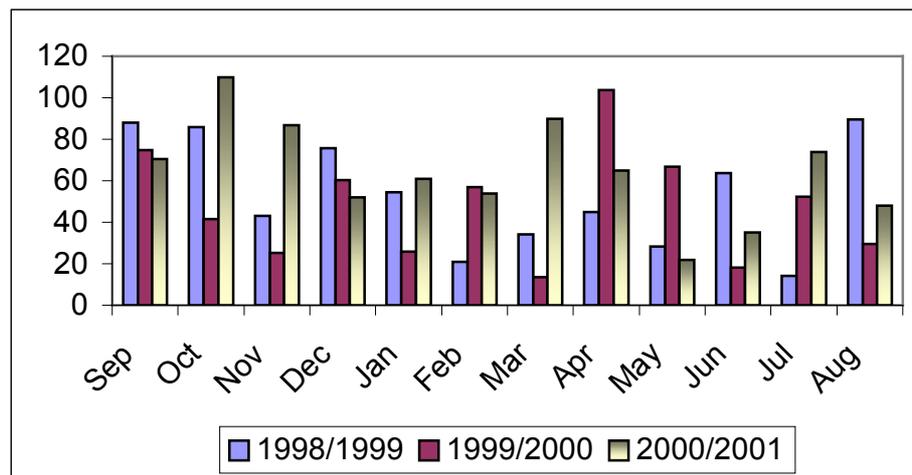
..... footpath

Foreword

Ron Elloway, Ranger, Huntingdonshire District Council

For the countryside, the year will be remembered for two very different things: water and foot-and-mouth disease.

The winter and spring were dominated by water on the reserve. For the third consecutive year, Paxton Pits received rainfall levels that were well above average. In fact, during the twelve months covered by this report, 768 mm (over 30 inches) of rain fell directly onto Paxton. As the graph below illustrates, five months (October, November, January, March and July) had higher rainfall even than the previous two wet years. But, of course, it is the rain that falls in the watershed of the Great Ouse, in north Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire, which most affects Paxton Pits. The river flooded the trails frequently and water ran from Sailing Lake into Heronry Lake for much of the period from Christmas to April. With the ground saturated, the soil remained wet through most of the summer, benefiting species that feed on ground-dwelling insects.



Cambridgeshire was very fortunate, compared to many other parts of Britain, that foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) did not devastate the local farming industry. As wildlife enthusiasts, we were also fortunate, since Cambridgeshire County Council responded to the unfolding crisis in a measured way: one of the few rural counties in England that did not close all their footpaths. Although one footpath had to be closed, Huntingdonshire District Council was able to keep open all the trails around the nature reserve, enabling local birders to enjoy their hobby and to record the wildlife around the Pits complex. In the report, there is no Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) data for March, when the survey was cancelled nationwide because of the FMD outbreak.

Birdwise, it has been an exciting year, with several species recorded around the reserve for the first time, including black kite and honey buzzard. Raptor sightings were the surprise of the year, with buzzards smashing all records, and merlin and peregrine being seen for the first time in several years.

This report records 158 species seen at Paxton Pits during autumn/winter 2000 and spring/summer 2001. Among the highlights are the first confirmed breeding of goldcrest (on the nature reserve) and coal tit (in the village); an influx of little egrets during the summer (how long before we see them carrying sticks into the heron and cormorant colony?); and a remarkable tally of waders on migration: 25 species.

Many of the breeding songbirds bounced back from low numbers in 2000. The bird surveys undertaken by volunteers, and co-ordinated by St Neots Bird & Wildlife Club, continue to be of considerable value to the management of the nature reserve. Information about the wintering wildfowl dates back to the early 1960s, on the cormorants and nightingales to their establishment on the reserve in the 1980s, and for all breeding birds since the start of the Paxton Breeding Bird Survey (PBBS) in 1998.

Yet the authors of the report remind us that there are some species for which we have little information, especially those that are difficult to detect, such as breeding tawny owl, goldfinch, woodpigeon and hobby. Such information is vital if we are to manage the nature reserve for its wildlife in the future. How else do we measure whether our work is successful? How else do we track changes in response to the maturing of the habitats?

The key to the success of conservation at Paxton Pits is the teamwork. Staff from Huntingdonshire District Council work closely with volunteers to manage the habitats, monitor the wildlife, organise events, run the Visitor Centre and, through the Friends of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve, raise funds for the nature reserve. Close collaboration with Aggregate Industries, the Sailing Club and the RSPB enable us to help breeding waders and terns beyond the boundaries of the reserve. Thanks are due to all involved.

On the nature reserve, this has been a year of planning, with 2002 set to be an exciting year, as we expand the Visitor Centre and begin work on an exciting project to recreate a wet meadow and provide new food sources for declining farmland birds. Tens of thousands of people enjoy Paxton Pits every year – it's wonderful to hear of days enjoyed at our wetland, whether you're a regular or have visited just the once. Please keep enjoying Paxton Pits, and do your bit by sending your records for next year's Report.

Please send all records of birds recorded between September 2001 and August 2002 to Trevor Gunton, 15 St James Road, Little Paxton, St Neots, Cambridgeshire PE19 6QW.
Tel: (01480) 473562.

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

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

Cover illustration: Green woodpecker, by Paul Young

The systematic list

Great northern diver

One was found on Island Pit on 14th January, during the monthly Wetland Bird Survey (SM/MD). It stayed for just a few hours, however, before circling over the lake and heading west. This is the first record at the Pits since a long-staying bird on Pumphouse Pit from November 1994 to March 1995.

Little grebe

Small numbers remained on the Pits throughout the winter, peaking at eight in October. Most records come from the open, northern lakes, so one seen on Hayling Lake on 1st January (MSh) was unusual.

Access restrictions during the early part of the breeding season made it difficult to establish the number of breeding pairs, though later in the summer it became clear that birds were present on Farm Pit and New Workings. However, the situation was further confused by the loss of the latter site to quarrying activities during August. It is possible that broods from here moved to Farm Pit. It is believed that 5-7 pairs on the two sites fledged 15-22 young, with some pairs double-brooded.

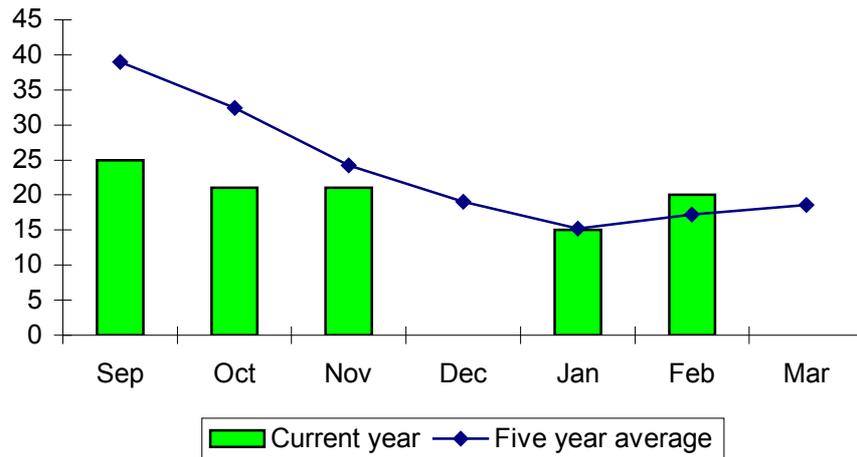
Great crested grebe

Numbers peak at the end of the summer, as adults moult, their numbers boosted by

young from that season. A late brood, of three, were on Heronry South during September 2000, though an attempt to construct a nest opposite Hayden Hide during the same month failed. Young birds remained with adults into October, sometimes being bombarded by black-headed gulls when being fed.

Numbers remained constant throughout the winter, with 20-25 birds through much of the season. The first record of displaying birds was a pair presenting weed to each other on Heronry Lake on 15th January (JM). Display continued throughout February and March, though several early nesting attempts failed due to high water levels. As a result, the first young were not located until 16th May, on Rudd Lake. On 21st May, 19 pairs were counted on the complex, though the final estimate for the summer is that 12 pairs raised a minimum of 19 young, a significant improvement on the ten young fledged in 2000. There were several late nests again in 2001, with two pairs raising young on Heronry South in late August, though an attempt by a third pair to build a nest from blanket weed failed, again.

Great crested grebe nesting activity always proves interesting: among the incidents noted this year were a pair taking over an old coot nest and, the following month, a pair of coots evicting a pair of grebes from an active nest.



Great crested grebes during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits

Slavonian grebe

One was on A1 South on 12th and 13th January (JM), the first Paxton record since November 1998.

Black necked grebe

Black-necked grebes are scarce passage migrants at Paxton, though commoner than slavonian grebes. Following five or six individuals in 2000/01, there was just a single bird this year, found on Island Pit on 15th December (MD) and subsequently seen on Pumphouse Pit, probably until 25th.

Cormorant

Regular dusk counts saw numbers build to 199 on 1st November, before falling back to fewer than 150 until the end of the year. Cold weather over New Year and in late January saw the winter peaks, with 230 on 20th January proving to be the highest (TGG/JH). This is the lowest roost count for many years, in line with fewer breeding birds during summer 2000 (though the wintering and breeding populations are probably comprised of different individuals).

The first bird in breeding plumage was spotted on 26th December (JM). Within a month, birds were wing-displaying on nests (JM/CS) and by 21st February, the roost was down to around 80 birds, with 35 nests apparently occupied.

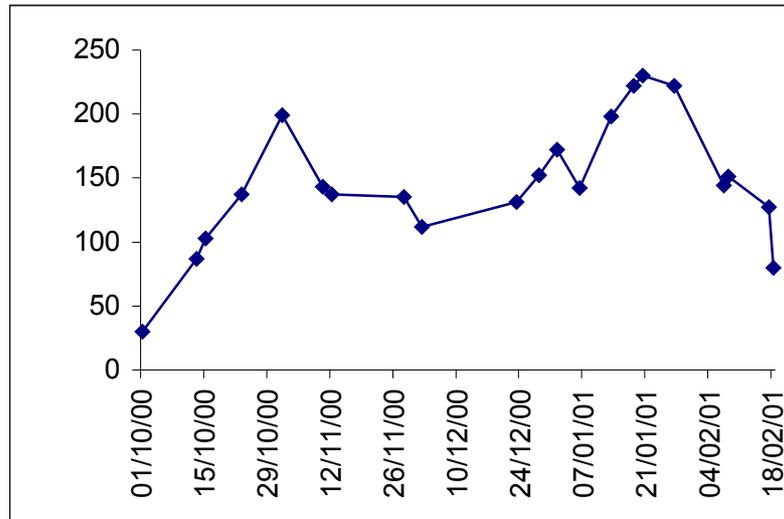


Cormorant (Rob Banbury)

By 18th March, there were 79 nests (JH), and the first young were noted on 1st April (TGG). The maximum nest count, of 121, was on 13th April (MD/SF/JH). It is estimated that c.200 young probably fledged from the colony in 2001.

By early August, with most nesting completed, 50 birds regularly roosted, though two birds were still sitting. At the month's end, two nests contained three juveniles – the latest successful nesting attempt ever recorded at Paxton Pits.

The colony has declined from its peak in the late 1990s – perhaps as a result of changes in fish stocking policy at Grafham Water – though new colonies have been established in north Bedfordshire and on the Nene and Ouse Washes. The history of Paxton Pits' breeding and wintering cormorants is fully discussed in the 1999/2000 Report.



Cormorants roosting at Paxton Pits, October 2000 to February 2001

Bittern

Following a blank year in 1999, a bittern was reported by different observers on several dates between 11th February and 7th March (per FD).

Little egret

Last year, reporting on the third record for the Pits, we speculated whether that would prove to be the start of regular visits to the Pits. Spring 2001 brought one bird, flying north over Island Pit on 11th May (SM). One on 30th July (SM/JP) remained in the area for more than a week, enabling many Paxton regulars to catch up with this local rarity. However, a remarkable four little egrets were found on 9th August (JLFP), remaining until 11th.

At least two birds stayed in the area until 27th August, though three were seen on 15th (JL). For the remainder of the month, and into September, at least one bird remained, spending much of its time on the northern pits and roosting in the cormorant and grey heron colony in the evenings.

The group of four is probably the largest yet recorded in Cambridgeshire. With up to 100 pairs now breeding in southern England, this species will surely be a regular feature of future Paxton bird reports.

Grey heron

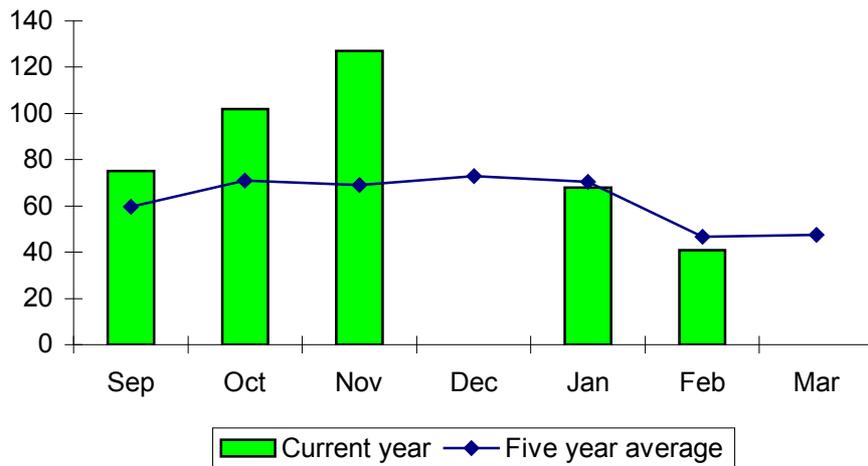
Present throughout the year with birds at the colony on Heronry South from January, though severe weather conditions delayed nest repairs and display. One bird was seen carrying nesting material on 2nd February (JM) and birds were seen displaying by the 13th (CS). By mid-February, at least three nests were active, increasing to five by 13th March. Observations suggest that at least one other nest, and probably two, was active deep within the cormorant colony (TGG).

By mid April, young were being fed, including four in one nest. Juveniles remained around the colony until June, using it as a night roost. It is estimated that 10 young were raised from 5-6 nests.

By the end of the season, 16 birds were recorded from around the Pits complex (RES).

Mute swan

As the Pits mature and the area of water and bankside vegetation increases, there are more nesting opportunities for mute swans. Wintering numbers have increased, from a maximum of 20 between 1960 and 1980, to regularly over 60 since 1990. Winter 2000/01 blew away all the records, however, with a remarkable count of 127 on 19th November (WeBS count). Numbers then fell during the remainder of the winter.



Wintering mute swans during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits

A pair were seen mating on Heronry Lake on the early date of 13th January (MD), and the first nest was seen, on Rudd Lake, on 5th April (CS) – it later hatched eight cygnets. Our best estimate of breeding success is that 11 pairs raised around 34 young, on seven lakes.

Even well-grown young need the assistance of their parents to get their food supply of underwater weed, especially when the water levels are high. This was regularly observed on Heronry South, where two attentive parents looked after four young until well into August.

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

Whooper swan

Seen on three dates during the winter: a single on 26th December (per Rare Bird Alert), 17 flying north over Sailing Lake on 12th January (JM) and three flying south over Island Pit on 14th March (MD). Whooper swans are rare at Paxton, with fewer than a dozen individuals or parties recorded. The flock seen in January appears to be the largest number ever seen at the Pits.

Pink-footed goose

Four were seen associating with greylag and Canada geese on 25th February (SM/RP), before flying northeast alone. These are presumed to have been feral birds, since 'pinkfeet' are scarce in Cambridgeshire away from the Ouse Washes, though the date would be typical for wild birds beginning their return to northern breeding grounds.

Greylag goose

Monthly winter counts fluctuate significantly, as the graph (on page 9) shows, presumably as birds were feeding on winter stubbles (of which there was an abundance this winter, because early autumn rain prevented ploughing). Even the peak count (463 in November) was low, compared to those in the 1990s.

Birds displayed from early March, with the first reported nesting on 19th (JM). The first young were seen on 19th April, on Rudd Lake (CS). An estimated 48 pairs nested, with breeding reported from ten lakes. Summer counts are traditionally high, with young birds joining the flocks of moulting adults. Late June saw a complex-wide count of 429 (RES), increasing to 600 on 26th August (JH), with 450 regularly on Washout Pit during

the month. Of note was a Canada/greylag hybrid seen on 25th August (RES).

Canada goose

Numbers of Canada geese generally peak in September, with moulting adults and family parties, before dispersing during the winter. This year was no exception (210 on Washout Pit on 9th, TGG), then few during October to January. Although there was no Wetland Bird Survey in March, other counts indicate that there were around 50 birds on the Pits in March and April.

This species has a more restricted distribution at Paxton than greylag goose, with most nesting pairs on Sailing, Island and Pumphouse Lakes. The first young

were noted on Island Lake on 22nd April (NP), with others on Heronry and Sailing Lakes during the following week (CS). Overall, it is estimated that 23 pairs nested in 2001 and, although there is no estimate of productivity, a flock of 31 young with 12 adults (TGG) is noteworthy. Numbers increased towards the end of the summer, with a count of 230 on 26th August (JH) as birds arrived from elsewhere in the Ouse Valley.

Of interest was a small individual, believed to be of the race *hutchinsii* (known as Richardson's Canada goose), from 15th-17th August (JLFP). A Canada/greylag hybrid was seen on 25th August (RES).

Barnacle goose

Up to two feral birds spent the year around the Pits, though only one was reported after mid-April. This paired with a Canada goose on Heronry Lake (RES), though unlike last year, no hybrid chicks were reported.

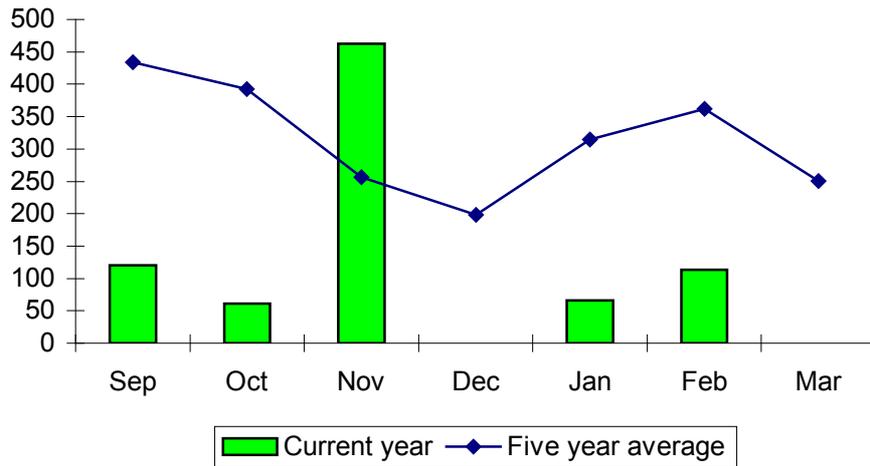
Egyptian goose

Only one record this year, on Heronry Lake on 13th April (FD/WD/JM). This introduced species is scarce at Paxton, though they have been almost annual in recent years. These are presumably birds from feral breeding sites in East Anglia.

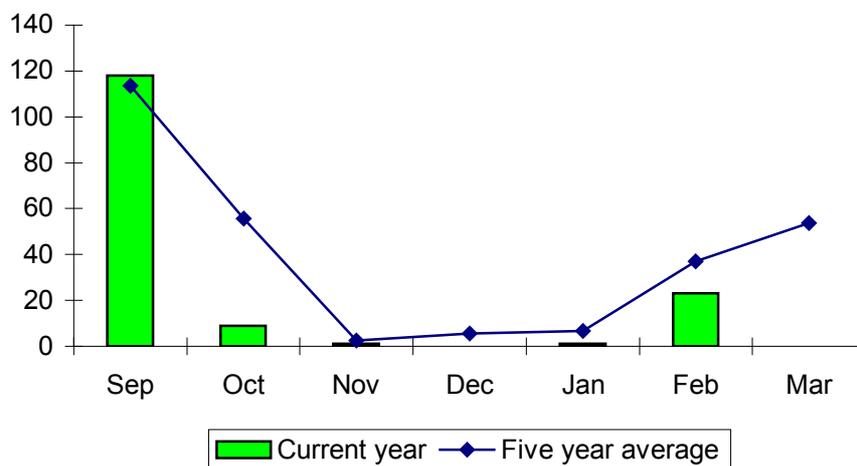
Common shelduck

There were no sightings during autumn 2000, until one on Washout Pit on 17th December (JH/JW). A single bird was seen from mid-February, joined by another on several dates from 19th. By early March, a second pair was present, frequenting the Great Paxton floods and the northern Pits, displaying on 3rd April (JM).

Numbers fluctuated throughout April and into May, peaking at 6 pairs on 3rd June. One pair hatched eight chicks in early June (MD/JW), although the male quickly disappeared, as did the other ten adults. Six of the juveniles - but no adults - were still present on 26th July (RES), and the last was reported on 12th August (SC).



Winterring greylag geese during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits



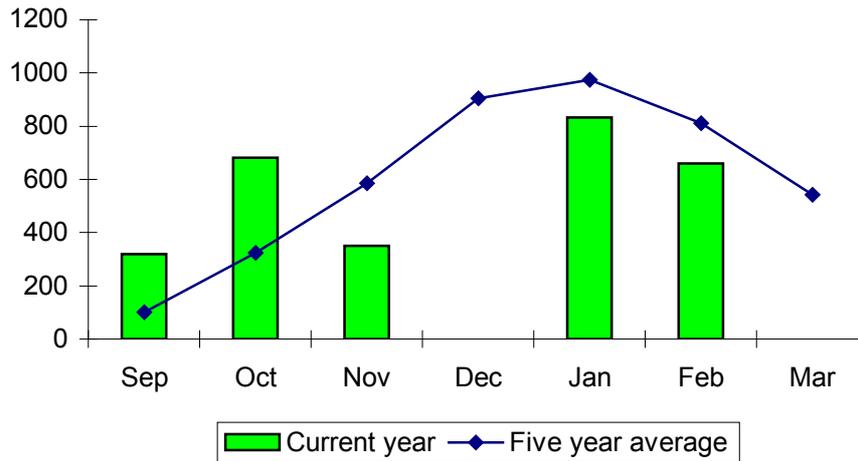
Winterring Canada geese during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits

Mandarin

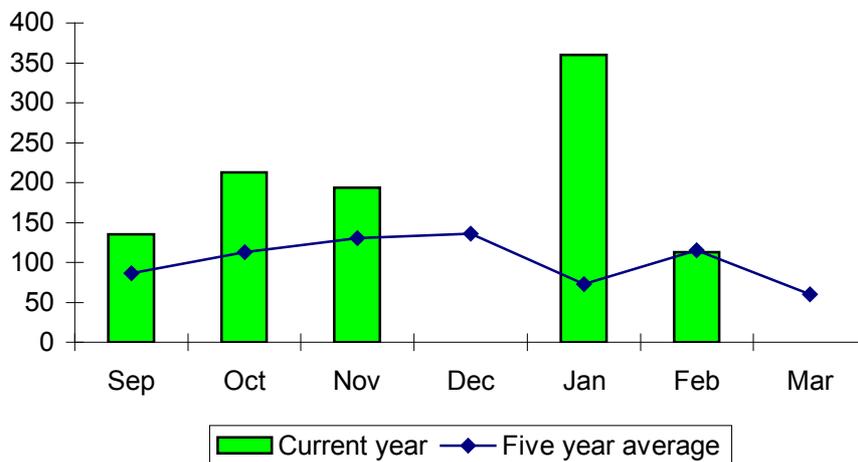
This introduced species was commoner during the 1980s and early 1990s, but now there are just a few records annually. Typically for recent years, all records were in the early autumn, presumably after breeding, though we wonder where? Two males and two females were seen on Heronry and Washout Lakes between 4th and 16th September (PN/MD/JW). At the end of the recording period, a female was on Washout Pit on several dates between 2nd and 10th August (TGG).

Wigeon

Numbers built up rapidly during early autumn, but then dropped back, remaining below average for the rest of the winter. The peak was 834 on 14th January (WeBS count). Over 70 were still present in mid March, but numbers tailed off quickly, with the last birds reported on the fairly typical date of 22 April (NP). Wigeon seem to return to Paxton earlier every year – the first sighting of the autumn coming with one on Heronry South on 10th July (FD). Numbers then increased gradually, with 22 on the complex by the end of August (RES).



Winterring wigeons during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits



Winterring gadwalls during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits

Note that there were no Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits in December 2000 (as a result of thick fog) or in March 2001 (as a precaution against Foot and Mouth Disease).

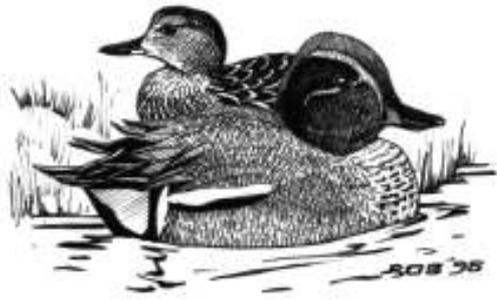
Gadwall

Winterring numbers were well above average, with a big increase during late December as other lakes in the area froze during cold weather. These birds remained into the New Year, with a peak count of 360 on 14th January (WeBS count). This is the second-highest number ever recorded at Paxton Pits, just pipped by the 376 counted in December 1980.

As milder weather returned in February, birds dispersed. Two pairs displayed on Heronry South as early as 8th February (RES). This lake became the centre of breeding season activity, with ten birds

prospecting the area once the winterring birds had left. Proof of breeding came late, with a brood of four on 28th June (RES), though broods were also recorded on the New Workings in July. By early August, well-grown young gadwall mixed freely with the moulting mallards, making counts difficult, but we believe that four pairs raised 10-12 young this year.

This very successful breeding season was followed by large moulting flocks, with counts of 70 on 27th July (TGG) and 85 on 29th August (RES). An apparent gadwall/pochard hybrid was on Heronry Lake on 3rd February (JM).

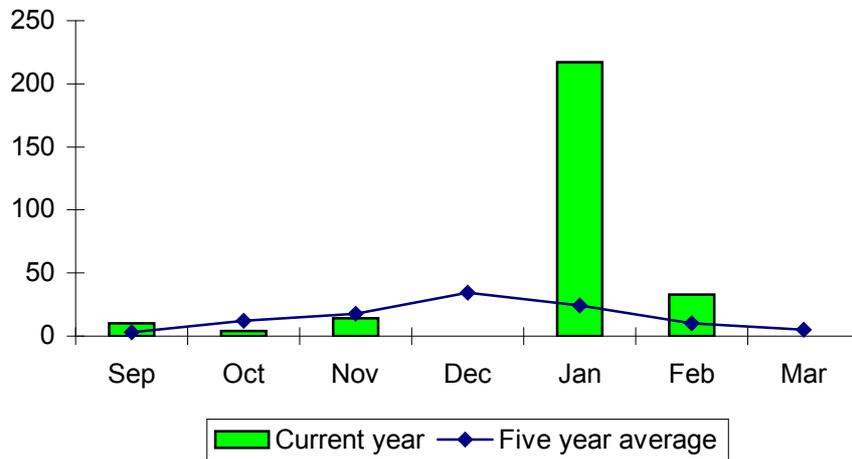


Teal (Rob Banbury)

count), the largest number since 295 were recorded in October 1982. Pumphouse Pit consistently held the largest flock, peaking at 124 on 28th January (MD/JH), though Heronry South also held up to 80 birds. Birds dispersed in late winter, though a flock of 30 were on Great Paxton floods on 6th March (CC). Although a few birds paired up in April and May, no breeding was suspected. At least two remained throughout the summer, joined by up to seven others from late July.

Teal

Like gadwall, numbers of teal peaked in January, presumably induced by two periods of cold weather. The maximum count for the Pits was 217 on 14th January (WeBS



Wintering teals during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits

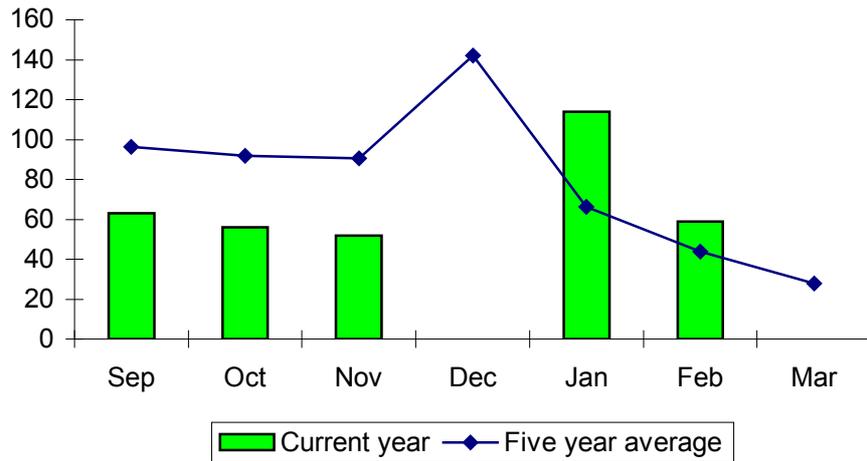
Mallard

Numbers of mallards at Paxton Pits have declined over recent years – there haven't been two consecutive months with over 200 birds since 1992/93. Counts remained low this winter, peaking at 160 birds on 28th December (TGG), when 90% of the Heronry Lakes were covered in ice.

With few birders apparently recording this species, early breeding season records are

few. The first brood, of seven young, was seen on Heronry South on 4th May (JM) and was followed by successful breeding on at least six other lakes. Our best estimate is that 9 pairs raised 37 young.

Numbers increased after the breeding season, with up to 160 birds throughout August, including a flock of 60 on Washout Pit on 5th August (JH).

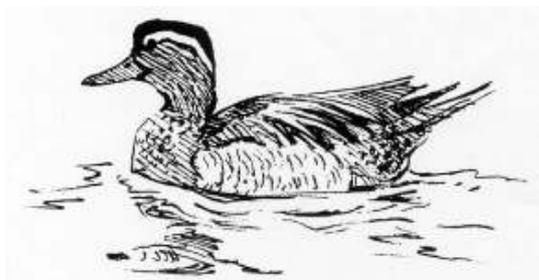


Wintering mallards during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits

Pintail

The year saw increased occurrences of pintails at Paxton, with a minimum of eight males and nine females. Until mid January, all records were singles, on 19th November (JH/JW), 2nd-3rd December (a male, JM/DM), 29th-30th December (a female, MSh) and 13th-16th January (a male, JM), except for two females on 16th-17th September (TGG).

On 24th January, two males and three females were seen on Heronry Lake (CS) and sightings of various numbers continued until 18th February, peaking on 10th February with four males and four females (TC). The final record of the winter was three (including two males) flying south along the river on 24th March (JW).



Garganey (John Busby)

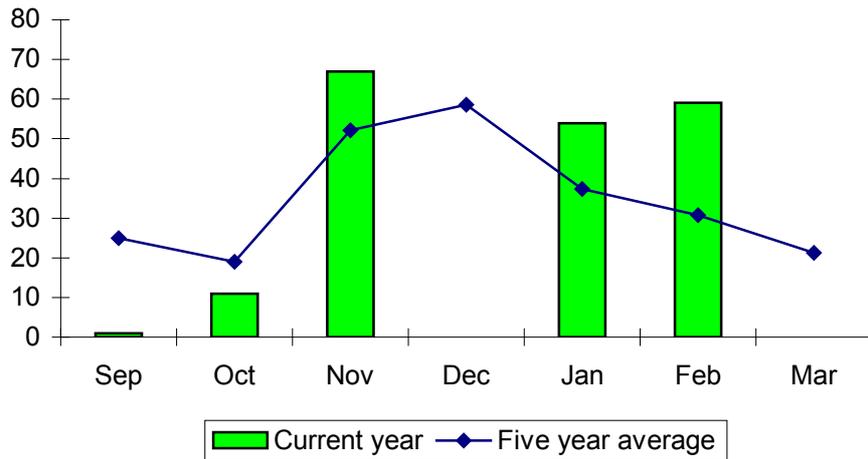
Garganey

Garganeys look their best in summer plumage, but with a vast array of Cambridgeshire wetlands to choose from this spring, none appeared at Paxton. All our records were in the autumn: females on 3rd September (SM/JW) and 16th September 2000 (MD/JW). Three were noted in August 2001: an eclipse male on 18th (MG) and an eclipse male and juvenile on Heronry North on 25th (RES).

Shoveler

After a very slow return to the Pits in autumn 2000, numbers increased during November and peaked with a count of 175 during a cold spell on 30th December (RES). Flocks of 60 were seen on Rudd and Heronry Lakes in mid January, remaining on the latter until early March. A count on 13th April revealed almost 100 still on the Pits complex (MD/SF/JH).

In early April, up to 12 males were displaying to two females on Heronry Lake, and small numbers (up to five) remained throughout the summer. Display was recorded on several occasions, at least until early June, but there was no indication of breeding. By late August, around 30 birds were frequenting the Heronry Lake (JH/RES).

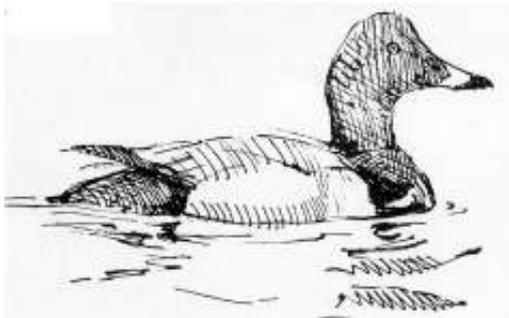


Wintering shovelers during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits

Red crested pochard

A female of unknown origin was seen regularly, usually on Heronry Lake, on 31 dates between 20th September 2000 (MSm) and 30th March 2001 (JM, TGG); a second was seen on 27th November 2000 (JLFP). On 14th March, the long-stayer was seen to mate with a male (common) Pochard, but since it was not seen later in the spring, we shall never know whether hybrid young were produced.

the month's end (JH). An apparent pochard/gadwall hybrid was on Heronry Lake on 3rd February (JM) and a pochard/tufted duck hybrid was noted on 15th May and 9th August (JLFP).



Pochard (John Busby)

Pochard

Counts were consistently lower than the previous year, with a peak of 288 birds in November (WeBS count, see next page). Numbers tailed off in March, though a male and female remained into early May (SE/SM/JWi). One on Heronry Lake on 28th June was very unseasonal (NP). Moulting flocks increased in July, with more than 50 present from 5th August to

Tufted duck

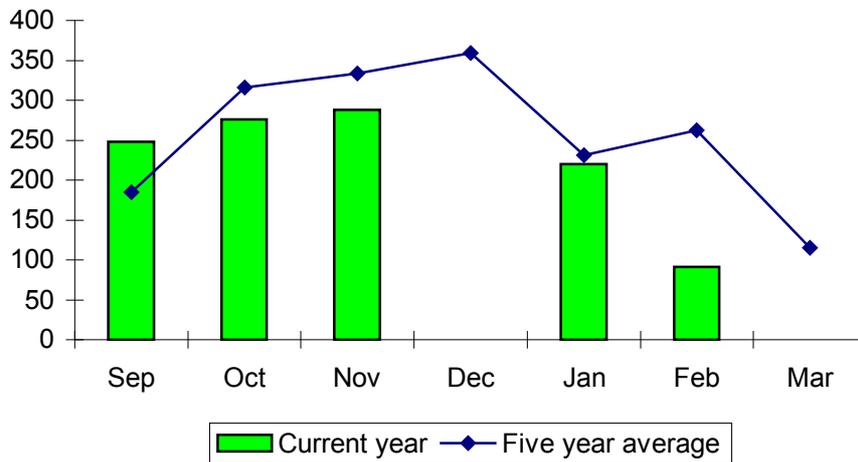
Winter counts were slightly down on 1999/2000, with a peak of 505 on 14th January (WeBS count). Numbers fell in late winter, as birds dispersed to breeding sites, though 88 on 26th April (RES) represents a good early spring count.

Successful breeding came from just five lakes, with Heronry South again being the centre of activity. We remain puzzled by the lack of breeding pairs from the mature lakes (Rudd, Hayling, Cloudy) south of the centre, which have plenty of vegetation. Is this really correct?

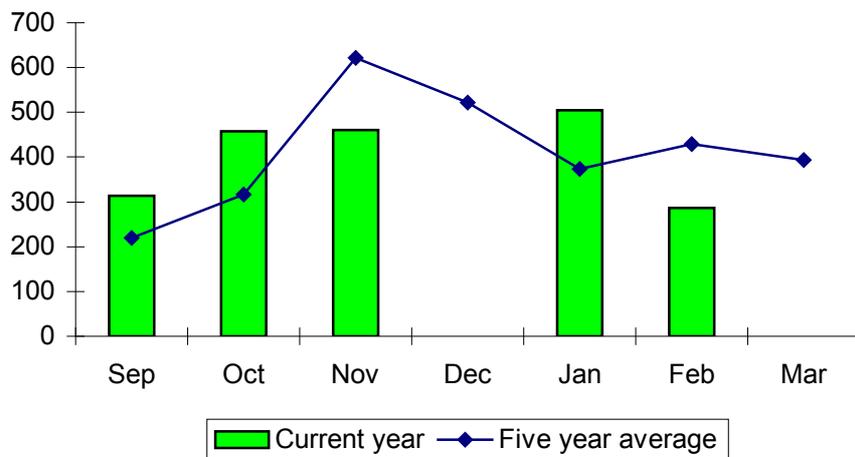
Tufted duck is a late-breeding species, with the first chicks recorded on 26th June,

on Heronry North (CS), followed by at least four broods on Heronry South in early July (including one of 11 chicks on 11th, FD). Young birds continued to appear up to 11th August and, on two occasions, ducklings were seen on the back of adult females, as often seen in great crested grebes. It is estimated that 10-13 pairs raised 30 young this year. Another very successful season.

A non-breeding flock of males remained in the area throughout the summer, with 50 on Island Pit on 30th June (TGG), 250 on Heronry on 8th July (TGG/SM) and a remarkable 540 on 5th August (JH). A pochard/tufted duck hybrid was seen on 15th May and 9th August (JLFP).



Wintering pochards during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits



Wintering tufted ducks during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits

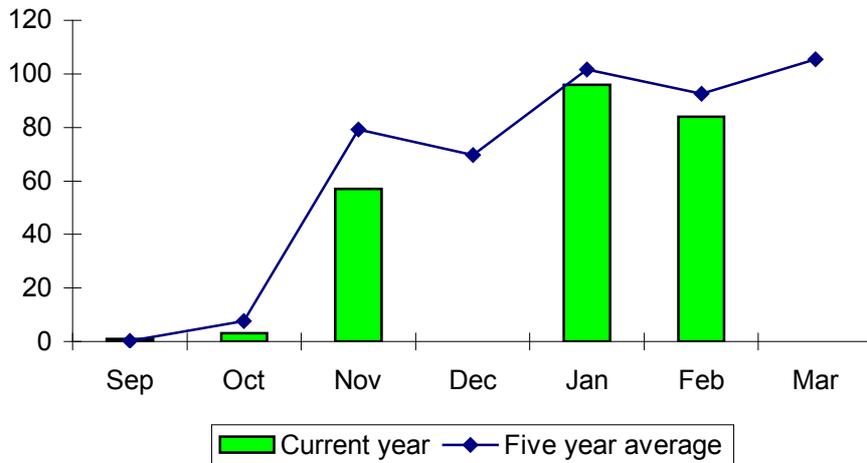
Common scoter

This seaduck is scarce in Cambridgeshire, averaging eight records each year. At Paxton, however, it is rare, with fewer than ten records. So, two in a year is unusual, though not exceptional (there were two also in 1979 and 1996).

The first was found on A1 South during a WeBS count on 17th September (JH/JW) and remained until at least the 21st. The second was present for just one day, 19th July (JLFP). Both were females.

Goldeneye

The first autumn arrival was a first-winter male on the early date of 17th September (SM). Numbers through the winter were fairly typical for Paxton, with WeBS counts peaking in January at 96. However, numbers remained high throughout March (when the WeBS count was cancelled), with the highest count of 102 on 21st (MC). Counts dwindled to single figures during late April, with the last of the winter – a male and female – on 10th May (SM).



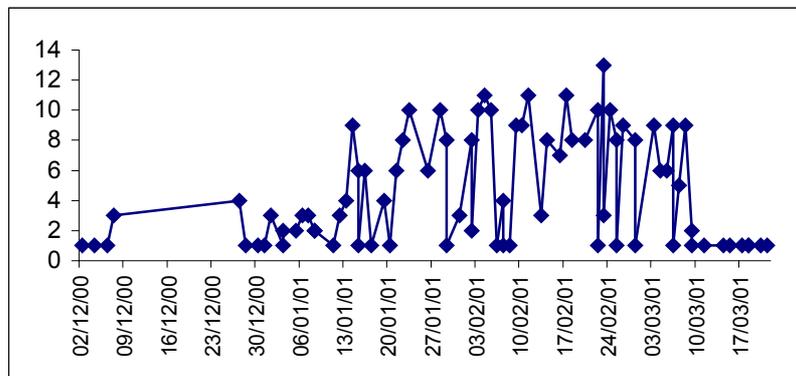
Wintering goldeneyes during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits

Smew

Smew have been a speciality of Paxton Pits since the late 1980s, but this year surpassed all records, with at least six present on most dates from mid January until early March.

The first of the winter, a redhead, was found on Island Pit on the early date of 2nd December (TGG) and there were at least four by the year-end. The peak winter count

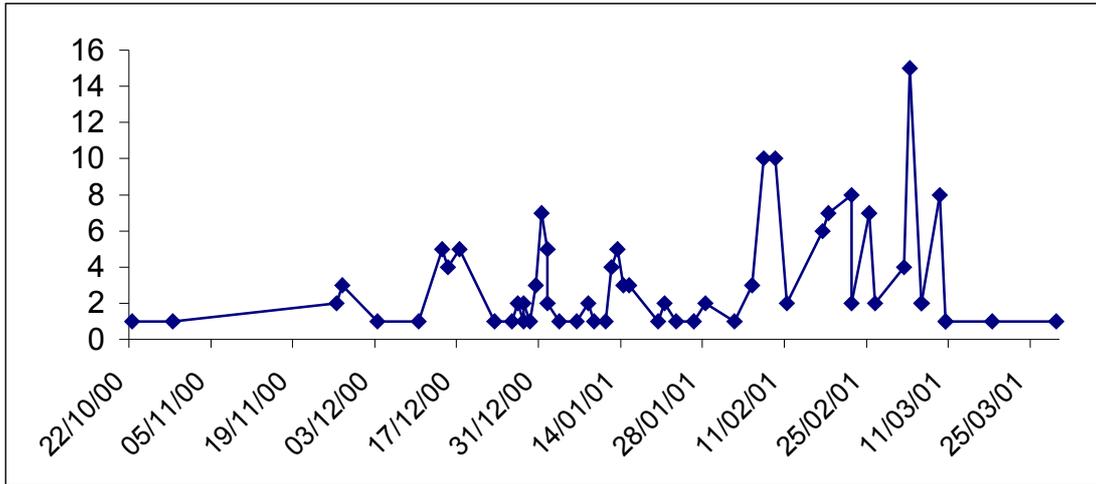
was 13 on 23rd February (TGG), though up to four males and 10 redheads were seen on different dates. This count equals the previous best, in February 1987 (also by TGG!). Birds were frequently seen displaying, and birds mated on several dates from 23rd February. Only one, a redhead, was seen after 11th March, remaining until the late date of 21st March (MC).



Smew at Paxton Pits, December 2000 to March 2001

Goosander

Since their peak in 1996, numbers of goosanders at Paxton Pits have been in steep decline, in sharp contrast to smew. This year, however, they reached a new low, with just one or two on most dates between the first sighting (22nd October, JH/SM) and early February. There was a late rally between 7th February and 4th March, peaking at 10 males and five redheads on the latter date (JM). Only one male was present after 9th March; last seen on 29th March (JW).

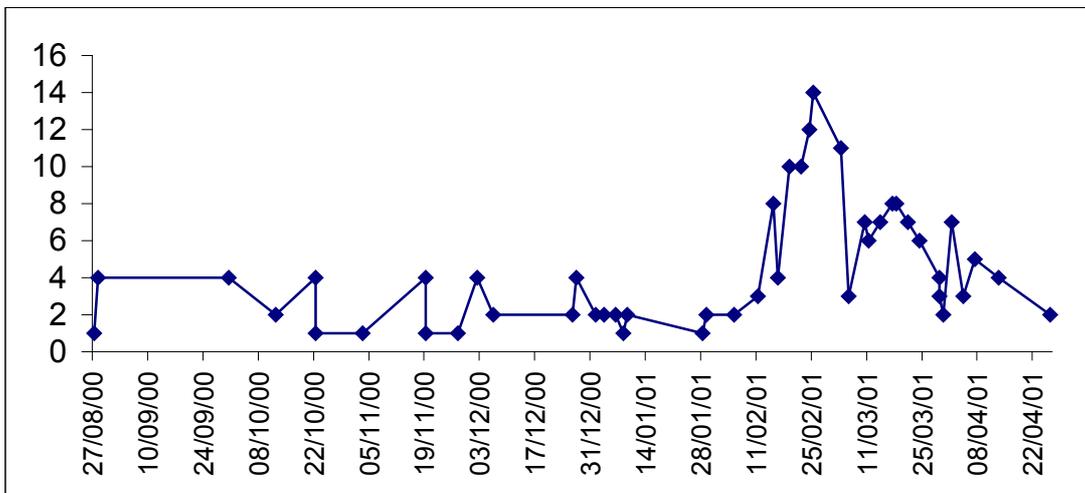


Goosanders at Paxton Pits, October 2000 to March 2001

Ruddy duck

This non-native species is now a regular wintering species at Paxton Pits, with breeding occurring at other gravel pits around Cambridgeshire. Up to four were seen between the first sighting of the autumn, on 27th August, and mid February. Numbers increased towards the end of that month, with 14 (including six males) on 25th February (JW), though seven males were seen on 4th March. Counts fell during April, with the last two – a male and female – seen on 26th April (RES).

None was seen during the breeding season, though a male, on Heronry Lake on several dates between 26th July and 5th August (RES/SM/RP), was unusual.



Ruddy ducks at Paxton Pits, August 2000 to April 2001

Honey buzzard

Autumn 2000 saw an unparalleled influx of honey buzzards from Scandinavia into eastern England. While dozens were seen at some coastal sites, Paxton hosted two: on 1st and 3rd October (MSh, TP). These are, perhaps surprisingly, the first and second records for the Pits.

Black kite

Another first for Paxton Pits. One was seen on 26th May, when several sightings were claimed between Huntingdon and Peterborough (BH). If submitted and accepted by the British Birds Rarities Committee, this would be only the second record in Cambridgeshire, following one at Staughton Moor, just west of St Neots, in 1989.

Marsh harrier

Marsh harriers are rare at Paxton, with just 10 previous records, but this year there were up to four, though possibly relating only to two birds. With the East Anglian breeding population continuing to expand, it's not surprising that they are becoming more frequent visitors to Paxton. A female was seen on 21st March (MC) and there was another on 21st July (SM/JW) and 26th July (RES). Another was reported on 9th August, but no gender was documented (JLFP).

Sparrowhawk

Singles were reported from the southern pits and village gardens throughout the period, though sightings over the northern pits are less frequent. An interesting sighting was of one bathing in a puddle near the Sailing Clubhouse on 6th March (JM).

A pair displayed over Heronry Lake on several days during April, and a local angler reported that adults regularly carried food into a presumed nest site near Hayling Lake (per NP). Four birds were seen on 19th August by one observer (GR), though whether these relate to the probable nesting is not known.

Buzzard

It seems remarkable that the first record of buzzard at Paxton was as recently as 1996. Even last year, there were only four sightings. By contrast, there were 17 in the last twelve months: two in September, one in November, three in February, one in April, four in May, three in June (including two together on 24th June, GF), one in July and two in August. With buzzards now back as a regular breeding species in Cambridgeshire for the first time since the 19th century, it will surely only get more common.



Osprey (John Busby)

Osprey

Just two records, one in each migration season: on 3rd October 2000 (MD), and 6th May 2001 (per MH). Their scarcity is surprising given that birds are now breeding only 50 miles away in Rutland.

Kestrel

Single birds were seen at various locations around the Pits complex throughout the year. Quarry staff reported one feeding regularly in long grass around the workings; there was no direct evidence of breeding, though a male was seen carrying food on 19th July (RES), so they presumably bred somewhere nearby.

Merlin

This winter migrant is a rare visitor to Paxton, though sightings increased during the 1990s. One possible merlin was reported on successive weekends in late November and early December over Island Pit (JMc).

Hobby

The last reported migrant of 2000 was on 3rd October, the same date as the previous year (JLFP).

The first of 2001 was on 28th April (SM), followed by regular sightings during early May, peaking with nine reported together on 15th May (per RES/TGG). During late May and June, up to seven fed regularly over the Meadow and Weedy Pit, but between 23rd June and the end of August, only a handful of singles were seen. For the second year in succession, it seems doubtful that hobbies bred in the vicinity.

Peregrine

There were only three records of peregrine prior to 2000, so a flurry of sightings in the autumn is notable. One was seen pursuing a pigeon over the Meadow on 21st September (RE), followed by a probable sighting on 16th October (MD) and a first-winter bird on 29th October (MD/JW). On 1st April, three birders reported one over Washout Pit – an April fool?

Red-legged partridge

This attractive, introduced species is now very rare locally so all records are notable. A pair was seen on just three dates throughout the period, seeming to confirm our fears that this introduced gamebird was going the same way as the native grey partridge. Then, out of the blue, a covey of up to eight young birds was seen in early September 2001 (JW). Where had they been all year?

Grey partridge

Could rumours of the grey partridge's local extinction be premature? Having had few records since 1997, when breeding was last suspected, two were seen on 26th November on farmland east of the river, opposite Hayling Lake (MSh). Even more surprising was two flushed from South Field during the Breeding Bird Survey on 10th June (DH/JP). The area was not searched again during the summer – could they possibly still hang on?

Pheasant

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

Water rail



(Mike Langman)

After the confirmed breeding in 1998, water rails have become much scarcer. This year, there were only five records, all but one on Washout Pit, and all during the winter. The earliest was on 30th September (RP); the latest on 11th March (SM).

Moorhen

The Wetland Bird Survey formally recorded wintering moorhens at Paxton Pits for the first time during 2000/01. The peak count was 29, on 14th January, with the largest single count of seven, on Great Paxton floods on 28th January (MD/JH). We wonder whether our population is sedentary or if birds from other sites overwinter at Paxton?

Its shy, skulking lifestyle makes this a difficult species to survey. The flooded Meadow attracted birds in the early part of the breeding season: two juveniles were seen there on 8th May (CS). Successful breeding came from six lakes, with 10 pairs raising 21 young. This is lower than the 15 pairs estimated in 2000, though the species may well be under-recorded on the mature, southern lakes.

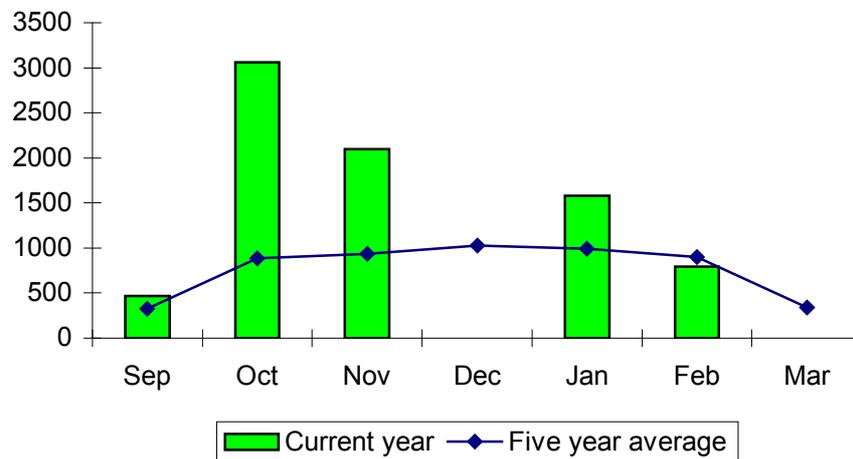
Coot

Wintering numbers were well above average through much of the winter, though the October WeBS count, of 3064 was unprecedented, smashing the previous site record of 2173 in October 1996. It would be fascinating to know where these wintering birds come from – the Ouse Valley, East Anglia or even the near-continent?

The first young of 2001 were on Rudd Lake on 28th March (IKD/DD), marking the start of a long and successful breeding season. In July, a pair took over an occupied great crested grebe nest on Heronry South (TGG) and, in August, an

adult coot was seen leading a small, juvenile tufted duck on Island Pit (JW). What an interesting species this is!

All of the lakes in the complex hosted coots this year, making it our most widespread breeding waterbird. In total, we estimate that 34 pairs raised 67 young. Large numbers of non-breeding (or failed breeding) coots remained around the Pits through the summer, numbers increasing as they were joined by breeding birds and juveniles. As early as 28th June, there were up to 280, mostly on Pumphouse Pit (RES/TGG), with 500 present on 26th July (JW). These numbers remained stable throughout the rest of the summer.



Wintering coots during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits

Oystercatcher

After no sightings in the autumn, the first sighting of the year was on 28th January (JM), which remained throughout February, spending most of its time on the Sailing Lake islands, before being joined by a second bird on 6th March (JM). In addition, four were on Pumphouse Pit on 17th March (MD). There was some evidence of light passage during April, with numbers fluctuating between two and six throughout April.

During March, two pairs became established, though one, which appeared to be incubating on Sailing Lake from 21st

(JH), failed to progress. On 18th May, the pair on Pumphouse Pit was seen with three young (MD), but the family seemed to remain intact for only a few days, as there was only one chick by 27th (JH).

This was still present on 10th June (RE/SM), though we received no further reports on the family for the remainder of the month.

Birds remained around the northern pits until 26th July (RES), occasionally being seen over Little Paxton village early in the month. These were the last, aside from a migrant flock of eight on 26th August (JLFP).

Little ringed plover

As the pits have matured, numbers of this species have declined dramatically – there were over 10 pairs in the late 1960s.

This year, the first was on Sailing Lake on 28th March (JM), more than a fortnight later than in 2000. From April, virtually all records came from the newer, northern area, with no more than five birds at any one time.

By the end of May, two pairs were in residence, producing two broods (one well-grown juvenile and two small chicks were seen on 30th July, MD/JH/SM). The only other record of note was four birds, of which two may have been juveniles, on Washout Pit on 1st July (NP). At least one bird remained in the breeding area throughout August, and into September.

Ringed plover

Only one was seen in autumn 2000, on Sailing Lake on 29th September (JM).

Spring passage was exceptional, beginning early, with birds on Sailing and Heronry Lakes on 3rd February (JM). Birds were seen nearly every day between mid February and mid April. The peak count was 20, on 16th February (MSm), but exceeded a dozen on seven days.

From early April, birds took up residence on the eastern Pumphouse and Sailing Lake islands. At the latter site, four were regularly seen in 'flighting' display. At least one was sitting by 3rd May (TGG), with a possible second pair. The only sighting of young here was of two on 8th July (NP).

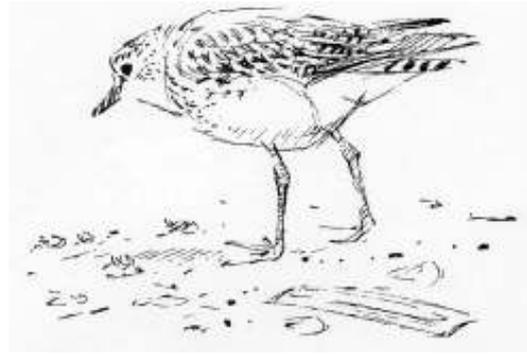
Pumphouse Pit proved more successful, with five pairs present on 21st May (TGG/RES), though estimating the number of young proved impossible in the long vegetation. One or two juveniles remained in the area at least until the end of August. There was light autumn passage, with up to nine recorded on 18th August (JLFP).

Golden plover

Eight over Pumphouse Pit were the only records of the autumn (MD/JW). Sightings were regular from late December until the end of March, mostly flocks of six to 30; 350 flying over on 28th December, during a cold spell, was the largest flock (MD/JW).

The first of autumn 2001 was a group of four flying north on 30th August.

Grey plover



(John Busby)

Three this year, the first records since April 1998. One was found on Washout Pit, during a foggy WeBS count, on 17th December (JH/JW). The other records were in spring, on 11th May (JW) and 28th May (SM).

Lapwing

The principal roost was at the north end of the Pits complex, with 200-500 birds between October 2000 and the end of February. Numbers diminished quickly in early March, as birds dispersed northwards and birds settled on the Pumphouse and Sailing Lake islands.

The first young appeared on Pumphouse island on 8th May (JM). By 21st, two pairs each had two chicks on the Sailing Lake islands (TGG/RES). One nest (with four eggs) was reported from the meadow adjacent to the Clubhouse on 27th June, where one chick was seen on 14th July (JM). Our best estimate is 7-10 breeding pairs, with productivity unknown. We have no information from the adjacent quarry areas or from surrounding farmland, where lapwings were formerly common, but are now probably extinct.

The autumn flock built up from late June, with a maximum of 270 on 26th July (RES).



Knot (John Busby)

Knot

One was on Pumphouse Pit on 4th March, the first Paxton record since 1996 (MD/JH/JW)

Sanderling

There were two records this year, involving three birds. Two were found on 15th May (MD/JW) and one on 1st August (JLFP), all on the northern pits.

Little stint

Just a single record during this period, on Sailing Lake (an unusual location for passage waders) on 3rd August (TGG).

Curlew sandpiper

Curlew sandpipers are rare in Huntingdonshire (there were no records in the county between 1839 and 1962!), so two records in a year is unusual. One was on Great Paxton floods from 29th April to 3rd May (JO/JW) and another was on the northern pits on 26th August (JH/SM/RP).

Dunlin

Dunlins were recorded in every month except October and December. Autumn passage was light, with birds on just a handful of dates, peaking with 12 in November (JLFP).

Spring passage began with one on Island Pit on the very early date of 14th January (MD/JH/JW), though migration did not really get going until mid February. The

peak count was 14 on 14th May (MD); more than 100 went through in total.

It's hard to know when spring passage finished and autumn's began, as there was less than three weeks between records on 5th and 24th June (JLFP, JH). Flocks of up to six were seen on most days during July and August, peaking with 11 on 27th August (SM/JP).

Ruff

In this exceptional period for waders, there were more ruffs than usual, with an exceptional flock of 11 on 16th November (JLFP) and two on the late date of 2nd November (SM). Aside from a party of three on 13th April (MD/SF/JH), the remaining six records were all singles: three in May, two in July and one in August.

Jack snipe

Many more reports than usual of this tiny, cryptic wader, thanks largely to a wintering group of up to nine birds around the northern pits (MD/JH/JW). The first of the winter was seen on 29th October (MD/JW), but most records were between 15th December and 4th April. This flock beats the previous highest count at the Pits, of seven birds in February 1975. The other surprising record is one reported from the north edge of Pumphouse Pit on 6th May (RE/IL).

Snipe

Small numbers throughout the winter, from September to mid April. Some of the counts were the highest ever recorded, including 44 on 15th October (JW), 61 on 28th December (MD/JW), 43 on 28th January (MD/JH) and 27 on 11th March (MD/JW). Most were on the northern pits, so two on Rudd Lake during a cold spell on 28th December were unusual (IKD/DD). The last of the spring was on 13th April (MSh) and the first of autumn 2001 were three on 29th July (SM).

Woodcock

A maximum of three of these secretive, camouflaged 'woodland waders' were seen on five dates, during cold weather between 30th December and 15th January. Rather poor by recent standards.

Black-tailed godwit

While the flock of 283 in April 1999 could not be matched, there were more records than usual this year. The first, of 60 birds flying northwest over Weedy Pit, was on the early date of 7th February (JM). Birds were seen on a further three dates in spring, including another flock of 60+ on 31st March (SM/NP/RP). Singles were seen on three dates in July and August, and there were three on Washout Pit on 5th August (JH).

Bar-tailed godwit

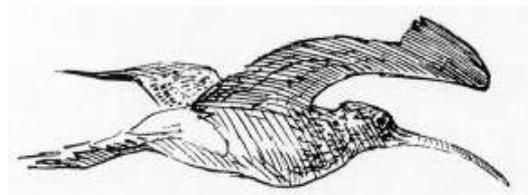
Perhaps the best year ever for this species at Paxton, though untangling the precise number in May is impossible. There were singles on 13th January (MD) and 16th February (MSm), then up to eight between 9th and 13th May, though three was the most seen at any one time (SM, JW).

Whimbrel

A good year for these migrant waders, too, with two spring records, on 15th and 26th April (MD/JW, RES), and eight birds on four dates in July and August, including a flock of five on 4th August (JM).

Curlew

Autumn records are more typical than spring at Paxton. The first was on 12th August (RES) and was followed by two on 16th (JLFP) and another single on 30th (JW).



Curlew (John Busby)

Redshank

A group of nine on Island Pit on 4th November was the only record of autumn 2000 (JW). Flooded fields on both sides of the river proved attractive to redshanks from January until March, with a maximum count of 20 on 16th February (MSm). Passage was strong in March, with up to 40 birds passing through the northern pits. Birds returned to breeding areas from early April, where display and mating was observed up to the end of May. A few young birds were noted on Sailing Lake and Pumphouse Pit islands, and two were on New Workings on 30th August. Overall, it is a rather incomplete picture, but our estimate is 8-10 pairs.

Greenshank

Two on 3rd September rounded off a good autumn 2000 migration for this species at Paxton. Spring 2001 saw a handful of birds frequenting Great Paxton floods, with a maximum of five between 8th and 11th May (SM).

The first of the autumn was on 1st July (JLFP), though August was the main month, with at least one bird on most days, and a peak count of six on 29th (JLFP).

Green sandpiper

Birds were recorded in every month of the period, even in June, when they are usually absent. Several were present throughout the winter, mostly on the northern pits, though occasionally on Washout Pit and flooded fields. The peak count was five, on 8th April (JW).

The last of the spring was seen on 11th May (SM), but it was only six weeks before the first of the autumn was seen, on 24th June (JH). Green sandpipers were reported on most days between mid July and the end of August, with a peak count of 10 (JLFP).

Wood sandpiper

Two individuals, for the second consecutive year. The first was a juvenile on 21st July (JW); the second stayed for a week, from 2nd to 9th August (JLFP).

with just one or two on several dates in late May and early July.

Common sandpiper

Small numbers passed through the Pits in September and early October: two on 24th September was the peak count (MD/JW). One on Sailing Lake from 31st October to 3rd November (JM) reminded us of last year's overwintering bird, but it wasn't seen again.

Spring passage began with one on 15th April, with most birds occurring between 6th and 18th May, peaking with six on 15th (JLFP). Autumn 2001 passage was strong, starting with one on Washout Pit on 28th June (NP). Southbound migrants were seen on most days, peaking at nine on 22nd August (JH, NP) and continuing into September.

Turnstone

A typical year: a single bird was seen on four days between 9th and 13th May (SM/JW), climaxing with a group of five on 14th (MD). There hasn't been an autumn sighting at Paxton since 1995!

Little gull

A very poor showing this year, with just one record, a first-summer bird on Sailing Lake on 14th May (DH/TPa).

Black-headed gull

Breeding was not proven, though pairs displayed on Sailing Lake in April and Pumphouse Pit in May. Otherwise, seen regularly over the more open Pits, with a late-summer gathering of up to 2000 birds on fields around the northern pits, before they roosted at Grafham Water. Particularly notable were groups of up to 250, predominantly juvenile birds, on Washout and Pumphouse Pits during July.

Common gull

Up to 50 were seen regularly during the winter among the gull roost around the northern pits. Scarce during the summer,

Lesser black backed gull



(John Busby)

Small numbers were recorded throughout the year, including up to 18 - including a few adults - on several dates during the breeding season. The highest counts were 70 on the flooded field east of Island Pit on 11th February (JH) and 60 on the New Workings on 30th July (MD/JH/SM).

Herring gull

Up to 70 were seen on Pumphouse Pit and in the gull roost to the west throughout the autumn and winter, with smaller numbers (up to 22) during the breeding season.

Yellow-legged gull

In contrast to the one record during the previous year, there were around 15 birds in 2001/02, mostly on the northern lakes. Singles were seen on eight dates during the winter, mostly adults. During July and August, up to four were seen together (JLFP) on seven dates. It's impossible to know whether they are occurring more frequently or whether local birders are getting more used to the identification. Probably both.

A third-summer individual of the race *cachinnans* was claimed on 17th August (JLFP). This would represent a first for Paxton Pits, with the date being highly unusual, since nearly all UK records are during the winter.

Great black backed gull

Small numbers were in the gull roost to the west of Pumphouse Pit throughout the year. a few immature birds loafed around the

area during the summer, with the first returning adult seen on 11th August (SC).

Common tern

The first returnee from Africa was on Pumphouse Pit on 8th April (SM), just a day later than in 2000. However, birds did not appear around Sailing Lake, the principal breeding area, until 19th April (TGG).

By early May, several pairs had settled on the small Sailing Lake island, though northerly passage continued into late May (40 over Island Pit on 21st, for example).

The first young were seen on Sailing Lake on 20th June. Although thick vegetation made counts of chicks difficult, 33 were counted there on 20th July (TGG). During late July, 3-4 young were seen on Pumphouse Pit (TGG).

An average breeding season: 20 pairs raised 35-40 young. The last of the summer were and adult and first-winter on Washout Pit on 22nd September (MD).

Arctic tern

After none last year, there were three in 2001: adults on 29th April (per IKD), on 16th May (MD) and a second-summer on 21st July (SM).

Black tern

Spring passage was relatively poor, though better than 2000. There were two in April (on 25th, RC), 36 in May (including a group of 17 on 12th, JW) and, unusually, a flock of six on 4th July (JLFP, NP).

Feral pigeon

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

Stock dove

The winter roost on Heronry Lake, which has hosted over 1000 during recent winters, had fewer than usual. The maximum count was just 104 birds, on 7th February (JH).

Little is known of the breeding status of stock dove at Paxton, though it has probably declined in recent years. No evidence was found of breeding in the village or in the traditional site adjacent to Pumphouse Pit. A pair is suspected of breeding in mature trees around Heronry South, though this was not confirmed.

During late summer, up to 20 fed regularly around the northern lakes, roosting in trees to the north of Boughton Lodge Farm (JH).

Woodpigeon

In contrast to stock doves, the numbers roosting around Heronry Lake during late winter were higher than usual. The peak was 700 (including a dark-phase and a leucistic bird) on 20th March (MA). No counts were received of birds feeding on nearby farmland.

Woodpigeons remain common around the village throughout the year, but few young are seen. The PBBS estimated 17 pairs around the pits complex.

Collared dove

A large number of pairs bred around the village, though birds were rarely recorded around the Pits. A group of 12-15 regularly fed on exposed gravel near Diddington during late August.

Turtle dove

The first turtle doves of the year were recorded on 4th May (DA), the last of the breeding migrants to arrive and ten days later than the first arrival in 2000.

The first indication of breeding was a pair aerial displaying adjacent to Heronry South on 24th May (TGG). Birds were thinly distributed around the southern pits in June and July, with occasional records from village gardens. Our best estimate comes from the PBBS, which recorded nine calling males, supported by a count of 8 in song and two in flight on 24th June (SM/RP).

Haul Road produced a crop of late records, with ten birds present up to 26th August, the same date as our last record in 2000.

Cuckoo

First heard on 17th April (MA), though there was a report by the Moorings on 7th April, which would be more than a week earlier than ever previously recorded.

There were few records in 2001, suggesting a poor year. Numbers peaked in late May, with up to eight birds heard around the Heronry Trail. Few were heard after 7th June, and two on 24th are the last records (SM/RP). Most breeding takes place around the southern lakes, probably parasitising the nests of reed warblers.

Barn owl

Barn owls are scarce around Paxton, but after the increase in records last year, there was just one sighting, around the Moorings on 20th March (NP).

Little owl

Just a single report this year, of one heard in Little Paxton village on 6th March (MSm/JW). No birds were seen at the site of successful nesting in 1999, after the site was taken over by jackdaws in 2000.



Tawny owl (John Busby)

Tawny owl

There is a tendency towards early autumn records at Paxton Pits, and this year was no exception: birds were heard on three dates in September 2000, two from the village (VG, TGG) and one around Heronry Lake (SM).

There were no specific records during 2001, but comments from other users of the Pits (especially anglers) suggest that tawny owls may breed around the southern lakes.

Swift

The first two of the year were recorded on the typical date of 26th April (RES), followed by a slow passage during early May. By contrast, several hundred birds moved north each evening during late May and early June.

The only evidence of breeding comes from one site in the village High Street that has been used in some previous years. Birds were seen entering a suspected nest hole on 26th June and eight were seen here on 16th July (TGG). The last two birds of the year were over Island Lake on 19th August (GR).

Kingfisher

Ones and twos were seen on several lakes through the winter; they appeared to suffer much less from the cold snaps than during the last severe weather in 1997 (when birds remained absent from the Pits until June). An unusual record was one visiting a pond in Lakefield Avenue in March (per TGG).

During the breeding season, kingfishers were reported from eight lakes, though most sightings were on the Heronry Lakes (the Kingfisher Hide remains the best place to see this species). Visual evidence would suggest two or three pairs, though only one was confirmed: at the southern end of Heronry South. An adult and probable juvenile were seen on the river, near the Moorings (ID) and four birds were seen on Sailing Lake on 21st August (NP).

Green woodpecker

This noisy resident had a very successful breeding season, with adults recorded in village gardens for the first time (TGG/BP), in line with national trends. Birds were present throughout the year, though more noticeable from early February as territorial activity got underway.

Green woodpeckers are very mobile, but up to four seemed active around Heronry

Lake. Adults with juveniles were noted along Haul Road, including a family group of five on 25th July (IL). The best estimate comes from the PBBS, which suggests five pairs.

Great spotted woodpecker

A familiar garden bird, seen regularly around the Pits, in gardens and on feeders outside Hayden Hide. Drumming was heard as early as 26th December (NP) and regularly from mid February.

The species is seen regularly on walks around the Heronry Trail throughout the year, but it seemed rather elusive in May. No family groups were reported, except three birds in a village garden on 30th June (IKD/DD). Most breeding takes place south of the parish boundary; this year's best estimate is 3+ pairs.

Lesser spotted woodpecker

This is one of our most elusive species: it was seen on four dates between October and April, mostly around the southern lakes. There were three sightings during May and June, but at different locations, with nothing to prove breeding. Unusual records this year were one on the Visitor Centre feeder on 8th June (CS) and one in Little Paxton Lane on 26th August (MD/JW). Perhaps just one pair?

Skylark

This formerly common, local breeding species is now a scarce resident and declining winter visitor to surrounding farmland. There was a big movement of skylarks in late December, peaking with 300 around the northern lakes on 28th (MD/JW), part of a passage that was witnessed across the county. Another movement on 14th January saw up to 100 birds around Diddington (JM).

The first singing bird was heard west of Haul Road on 11th February (JM). This area and the rough grassland around Pumphouse Pit were the centres of breeding activity, with an estimated six singing males in 2001 (PBBS).

Sand martin

Autumn concluded with a small southward passage of sand martins through September, the last four on 22nd October (GR).

The first birds of the spring were seen on 9th March (MD/JW), 12 days earlier than in 2000. Movements were light until the end of the month, then thousands of birds moved north during 3rd-8th April. Strong northerly winds disrupted the flow during early May.

Around 40 nest holes were found in the sand 'dumps' west of Washout Pit: the birds moved in within hours of the site being created in early May (AD). The main breeding area remains on and around the New Workings, where around 100 pairs nested (AD). At least one nest was still in use at the Washout site on 5th August and 10 remained active on 27th August (JH).

Swallow

A small passage south, with sand and house martins, continued through September and into October 2000. The last four were seen over Heronry Lake on the late date of 26th October (JH).

A possible sighting on 14th March (MD) - the earliest ever record for the Pits - was followed by several early April records, but early passage was slow until 20th, when 100 birds were over Heronry South (MA).

This is now a rare breeding species locally and, from the records received, they bred only at the Mill Bridge, Little Paxton, where two or three pairs nested in the drainage pipes (TGG). There may also have been one or two pairs around Boughton Lodge Farm, but Foot & Mouth access restrictions prevented confirmation. Are we to lose this familiar farmland bird as a breeding species?

House martin

A small passage south continued into October 2000. The last three southbound birds were seen on 10th (SM).

House martin was the first breeding summer migrant to return in 2001: one over Heronry South on 4th March (MD) was the earliest ever in Cambridgeshire. There was a gap of three weeks before the next straggler was spotted, as northerly winds held up migration. The only April record of note was 20 on 20th (MA). May migration remained slow, though June began with a movement of over 1000 birds on 2nd (TGG), which brought breeding birds into the village.

Local publicity resulted in records of 13 nests at 11 sites in Little Paxton village, plus eight nests on the old paper mill and house at the river crossing. This total of 21 nests is up on last year's 12 and the best count since 1996, though still poor compared to the 54 nests in the village in 1995. A further worry is that the old paper mill is set to be demolished in the coming months.

Light southward movement was noted during August, with birds staying into September around their breeding areas.

Meadow pipit

Numbers peaked at 50 around Island Pit on 12th October, with groups of fewer than six for the remainder of the year. Flocks of up to 20 were frequent during the first quarter of 2001, with 80 on 17th March being particularly notable (one of which was seen being taken by a sparrowhawk, MD/NP). Most were around the northern lakes, but the set-aside farmland around Heronry Lake also held up to 40. The last two of the winter were seen on 13th April.

Yellow wagtail

Autumn 2000 passage continued through September, though none was seen after 24th (MD/JW).

Three early birds were seen on 1st April (MD), the earliest ever at Paxton Pits (cf. 3rd April 1999). There was a light movement during the second week of April, peaking at 20 birds on 13th (MD/SF/JH).

During May to July, birds were occasionally seen around Pumphouse Pit.

A juvenile was seen here on 3rd August (SM), though autumn passage was already underway and there is no proof that it was raised at Paxton. Light autumn passage was noted throughout August, with double-figure counts on two dates.

Grey wagtail

A scarce resident, increasingly recorded around the pits during the winter. One or two were seen around various southern lakes from September to March, with occasional sightings around Pumphouse Pit.

Although grey wagtail was not recorded breeding around the pits complex, a pair raised two young at the Mill Bridge (first seen on 7th June, MD). An adult and juvenile were on Sailing Lake on 9th (SM) – were these the same birds or did another pair go undetected in our recording area?

Pied wagtail

This familiar species is seen regularly in village gardens and feeding along roadsides. Winter flocks of up to 30 fed regularly around the New Workings, though a group of 22 on the Meadow (23rd February, NP) was less usual. Light northward movement from February to April, often associating with meadow pipits, was noted.

We have little evidence of breeding in the village, except for a juvenile on the playing field on 3rd August (TGG). This must surely underestimate their status. Breeding was proven around the Lafarge Redland coating works, Sailing Lake clubhouse, Pumphouse Pit and New Workings (where 10 juveniles were seen on 24th June, JH). We estimate 4-5 pairs around the Pits, but would welcome information for the village.

After the breeding season, a flock of over 50 (with yellow wagtails) was on the New Workings (30th July, MD/JH/SM).

Birds of the nominate race ('white' wagtail) were on Washout Pit on 16th October (MD); three on 8th April (SM) and two on 13th April (MD/SF/JH).



Pied wagtail (John Busby)

Waxwing

Bird of the winter for many, this scarce visitor from Scandinavia was found on 30th December near Washout Pit (NP), and was still present the following day. On 6th January, two were watched for an hour near Heronry Lake (SM), and one was seen near the Visitor Centre on 15th February (CS).

Wren

A common resident in the village, suspected to breed in considerable numbers, with most mature gardens able to provide plenty of good breeding sites. Poorly recorded by birders, the only population information that we have is from the PBBS, which recorded 59 pairs. Ringing suggests that breeding success was quite good (see page 43).

Dunnock

This shy, ground-dwelling accentor is common in gardens and around the southern lakes. However, we received no records during the year, so depend on the PBBS for breeding numbers: it estimates 26 pairs.

Robin

This garden favourite is common across the area. The PBBS recorded 51 pairs, while ringing suggests that breeding success was quite good (see page 43).

Nightingale

It is pleasing that Paxton Pits' flagship species appears to be responding to scrub management. Despite much of their Haul Road habitat being flooded until late May, numbers remained on par with recent years.

The first singing male was on 6th April (per TGG), though the build-up was slow, with only 3-4 birds present by 21st April.

The next month saw numbers return almost to 'normal' for recent years, with 23 singing males on 23rd May (JH/SM/JW). Singing subsided during June, though one sang as late as 28th June (RES).

Although 16 adults were ringed near Heronry North, there was only one juvenile (see page 43). Several 'croaking' birds were heard in August; a juvenile around Heronry South on 28th (RES) was the last of the year. For the third successive year, no birds were recorded around Hayling, Rudd or Cloudy Lakes, but the range extended farther north, to the southern tip of Island Lake.

Whinchat

One was at the north end of the Pits complex on 7th October (MSm). Another was reported near to the Haul Road on several dates in early May, though some birders suggest that it was a sedge warbler.



Stonechat (John Busby)

Stonechat

This used to be a regular passage migrant through Paxton Pits, but with the demise of the breeding population in eastern England, it has become scarce. One on 7th October (remarkably, the same date as a whinchat) is the first record for several years (MSm).

Wheatear

What happened? Wheatears have always been regular, and early, passage migrants at Paxton Pits. This year, they were notable by their absence. The only spring records

were one around A1 North Pit on 16th April (MSh) and two on the northern pits on 7th May (SM). In the autumn, there were six on 26th August (MD/JW) and four on 27th (JH). And that was it!

Ring ouzel

A scarce migrant at Paxton, one obliging male was found on the village playing field

on the morning of 14th April (NP). It stayed for most of the day, associating loosely with a flock of up to 20 blackbirds.



Sedge warbler (Paul Young)

Blackbird

Despite being one of the most familiar, resident species, we receive few records. The village population remains strong, judged by the number of young in gardens during June and July (up to 20 regularly fed on the playing field on summer evenings), but the ratio of ringed juveniles to adults on the reserve was very low (see page 43).

The only information from the Pits complex is the 44 breeding pairs estimated by the PBBS.

Fieldfare

Birds arrived later than usual, with the first flock (of around 60 birds) flying west on 4th November (SM). Numbers were moderate during December and January, with up to 100 seen regularly. Small flocks flew east throughout March, with the last of the winter, a group of 28, on 31st (MSh).

Song thrush

Village sightings suggest that the species may be recovering from a big decline during the 1980s and '90s. Birds remained in song until well into July, perhaps suggesting competition for territories. The PBBS recorded 10 pairs around the Pits,

mostly around the southern lakes, though ringing suggests that productivity was poor.

Redwing

The first dozen redwings were on 15th October (SM), but numbers were low throughout the winter, however. Return passage was noted from late February,

peaked with 20 on 4th March (SM/RP) and finished with eight on 29th March (MA).

Mistle thrush

One or two pairs bred around the village, though they were less evident than in previous years. Mistle thrushes are poorly recorded from the Pits and we have no reports of family parties from here or the playing field, where mistles occasionally feed with other thrushes. The PBBS estimates two pairs from the Pits, including a pair seen regularly around Sailing Lake, where breeding probably occurred.

Grasshopper warbler

As last year, there were just two records in summer 2001: one in scrub adjacent to Heronry Lake on 15th April (SB/MT) and a second on the riverbank east of Washout Pit, on 19th May (GDE/GT). With no reports later in the breeding season, it is

now three years since the last possible breeding of this elusive warbler at Paxton Pits.

Sedge warbler

The first day of April saw the first of the year (MD), smashing the previous Paxton best by a week and more than two weeks earlier than the first in 2000. The main arrival occurred from 17th April, with 35 heard on 21st May (TGG/RES). Birds carried food around several lakes in early July, while others were still in song. The scrub around the nature reserve is ideal for the species, hosting 53 singing males during the PBBS, though substantially down on the 70 recorded in 2000.

Reed warbler

The first was recorded on Washout Pit on the early date of 7th April (MD). This is not only the earliest ever recorded at the Pits (previously 20th April 2000), but also the earliest in Cambridgeshire (9th April 1987).

The PBBS suggested 27 singing males, but later evidence suggests that many more were present, including 20 on A1 South. It is the latest warbler to remain in song: 12 were still singing on 26th July (RES). More work is required to establish the breeding status of this African migrant warbler.

Lesser whitethroat

The first of the year was around Heronry Lake on 15th April (MD/JW), perhaps the individual that was ringed there on 16th (GDE/GT). It was eight days earlier than the previous earliest at the site (23rd April 2000).

Only a few birds were reported throughout April and May, at odds with the 13 ringed adjacent to Heronry North, including several juveniles. The PBBS, supported by the ringing scheme, suggests five pairs – marginally down on previous years.

Whitethroat

Numbers at Paxton seem to fluctuate considerably, making it difficult to assess

trends. This year, however, would appear to have been good.

The first was recorded on 21st April (FD/WD), five days later than in 2000. Only singles were noted before the end of the month, but as the numbers increase, so the records dry up! The PBBS estimated 26 pairs, making some recovery after last year's crash.

Garden warbler

The first of the year were birds singing in the Meadow and near the Moorings on 28th April (SM). The main arrivals were in mid May, with the PBBS suggesting that 24 pairs were present – similar to 2000. Birds were seen throughout August, including recently-fledged young being fed by adults.



Blackcap (John Busby)

Blackcap

Autumn 2000 passage continued throughout September. Individuals were seen regularly around the Meadow and Washout Pit during November and December (presumably different birds). None was then reported on the reserve until mid March, though these two perhaps moved into village gardens to find a more reliable food supply once the cold weather set in.

Wintering birds confuse the picture of spring arrivals, with one singing around Heronry Lake on 19th March (the previous earliest was 24th March 2000). Greater numbers arrived in April. The PBBS estimated a season total of 44 pairs (down

on the 53 pairs in 2000), while ringing indicates a good breeding season (see page 43)

Migrants moved south in good numbers during August, with a remarkable record of 18 birds from the few square metres of Wray House Garden on 12th (GR).

Wood warbler

This species is rare at Paxton Pits (and with only two or three records in Cambridgeshire each year). One, possibly two, were seen in trees between Heronry Lake and the river during 27th-30th April, though the bird's distinctive song was not heard (FD/MSm/ Wolverhampton RSPB Members' Group).

Chiffchaff

Several records into late September and October around Heronry Lake, with three still present on 16th November (JLFP). At least one, but possibly two, remained into December. There was then a two-month gap before the first possible early migrant was seen, around the northern lakes on 25th February (SM/RP).

The main arrivals were in late March, with double-figures recorded for the first time on 24th (JW). The PBBS recorded 34 breeding pairs, almost identical to 2000, with the scrub around Kingfisher Hide and the trees between Haul Road and Sailing Lake proving to be the strongholds. Ringing suggests that productivity was high (see page 43)

Chiffchaffs remained in song until late July, when they started to join tit flocks roving around Washout Pit and the river bank. However, autumn passage continued throughout August and into September, with some birds singing once again.

Willow warbler

First recorded on 30th March along Haul Road (FD/WD/NP), but few others were

heard until late April, when 46 were counted (26th, RES).

Willow warblers are widely distributed across the southern lakes and appear in village gardens during migration. The PBBS recorded 45 pairs, slightly up on the 2000 count of 41 pairs. In contrast to many other warblers, few were recorded on southbound migration.



Goldcrest (John Busby)

Goldcrest

Singles were reported from half a dozen locations around the Pits through the winter, with regular sightings from Wray House Garden, near Kingfisher Hide.

On 1st April, a bird was seen carrying nest material into conifers in Wray House Garden (MD). Something presumably caused it to fail, because nest-building was seen again on 15th April (SB) and 5th May (SM). Adults took food into the trees from 3rd June (MD/JW) and a family of 4 or 5 juveniles was seen on 29th (RP). This is the first proven breeding at Paxton Pits, though we suspect that it has been attempted here in recent years, as well as in the village.

Firecrest

The first record for five years: one spent the afternoon of 8th April in willows at the north end of Washout Pit (JW).

Spotted flycatcher

After a paucity of records during summer 2000, several were seen on passage during early September, the last of the autumn on 10th (SM).

A single bird was seen at a former nesting site in the village on 21st May and 2nd June, but the lack of records from here or the pits complex suggests that no breeding took place.

Two were seen along Haul Road on 12th June, but these were the sole records until a series of observations between 28th July and 18th August. Three of these involved family parties: three birds around Washout Pit on 4th August (TGG), 5-7 birds in Wray House Garden on 11th August (SM/JW) and 4-5 birds around Heronry Lake on 18th (RP). Presumably migrants, but could they have bred undetected?

Regrettably, this appears to be another breeding species lost from Paxton; the reasons for this trend, reflected nationally, remain unclear.

Long-tailed tit

Now a regular visitor to garden feeders in the village, with up to 20 birds at a time. Small parties were around the reserve in winter and spring, including one possibly of the pale-headed continental race, along the Haul Road on 15th April (JMc/MMc).

The PBBS suggests that 14 pairs bred around the reserve. Post-breeding flocks were very evident, especially around the southern pits and the river. There were no breeding records from the village, however. Most observers suggest that long-tailed tits are becoming more numerous locally, reflecting the fact that the PBBS count has doubled since 1998.

Marsh tit

One was seen regularly from the Heron Trail during the winter, occasionally frequenting the Hayden Hide feeders. The only record into the breeding season was one heard along Haul Road on 28th April (JW).



Marsh tit (Rob Hume)

Coal tit

Regularly reported from village gardens, principally as a winter visitor, though one was regularly heard from the churchyard during the summer. On 6th September, an adult and two juveniles were found in a village garden, only 50 metres from the church (MD). Perhaps the first local breeding of this species? We received no records of coal tits from the pits complex.

Blue tit

The British Trust for Ornithology's Garden Bird Feeding Survey recorded blue tits in 100% of gardens during the winter – this must be the case in Little Paxton. Many gardens also hold breeding blue tits, mostly in nestboxes.

While being common in woodland and scrub around the Pits throughout the year, few are specifically recorded by birders. The PBBS suggests an increase in 2001, to 47 pairs (compared to 38 in 2000).

Great tit

A dominant garden bird feeder, with a strong breeding population in the village. Young were seen well into July. The population around the Pits has remained stable, with 35 pairs this year, compared to 32 last year (PBBS).

Treecreeper

Singles were reported occasionally during the winter, though two together near Washout Pit on 29th December was notable (MSh). This resident species is difficult to

survey, but the distribution of records at the Pits, from Washout in the north to Hayling Lake in the south suggests at least two pairs, and probably more. It is rare to prove breeding, however.

A pair was seen nest-building near the Moorings and courtship feeding in mid April (MD/JM). Two adults and 1-2 juveniles were seen nearby on 3rd June (GF/AP). We received no reports from the village, however, so comments are welcomed.

Jay

This colourful crow appears to be on the increase locally and is almost guaranteed on a visit to the Heronry Lakes throughout the year. Individuals are occasionally recorded in village gardens, usually in the early morning. Family parties were noted in late summer along Haul Road and we believe that two pairs bred successfully.

Magpie

Magpies are seen regularly around the Pits and on garden bird tables. The roost behind the coating plant peaked at 85 birds (cf. 90 in 2000), on 2nd December (PL).

Birds were seen regularly around the cormorant colony during the summer. The PBBS estimated seven breeding pairs, though this may be an underestimate.

Jackdaw

The mixed roost of corvids and pigeons was smaller than in previous winters, though did include a minimum of 1000 jackdaws on 28th December (SC). A summer count, on 3rd August, found a similar size roost (TGG).

A pair at Paxton Hall is the only confirmed breeding in the village, though young birds regularly fed in gardens during the summer. Few records are received from the Pits, so it is difficult to assess its breeding status.

Rook

Birds returned to the Sailing Lake colony during the late winter. A count on 18th

March found 47 nests, increasing to 71 on 3rd April (JH), perhaps an increase on 2000.

In May, one regularly visited a bird table in St James' Road – a garden first (TGG). During June and July, over 200 birds fed behind a plough north of the rookery; 300 were counted there on 6th August (TGG).

Carrion crow

Carrion crows are in the area throughout the year, regularly roosting with jackdaws, woodpigeons and stock doves on Heronry South. The peak count here was 3000 birds on 7th February (JH). Also of note were 44 standing on the ice on Rudd Lake on 29th December (IKD/DD). During February, 50-100 carrion crows fed regularly on the Meadow, presumably taking advantage of the soft earth as the floods receded (RE/JM).

We have little information about breeding, but the PBBS and other observations suggest three or four breeding pairs.

Starling

Despite a national decline, starlings remain common around village gardens, wherever food is available. Breeding was noted in the cormorant colony, along Haul Road and in the Sailing Clubhouse, where the birds were almost certainly double-brooded.

The usual late summer and early autumn gatherings were seen around the village and over the northern lakes, with 1000 birds over Island Lake on 3rd July (TGG).

House sparrow

House sparrows do not breed around the Pits, though they are relatively common in the village. An interesting observation was 20 roosting in the allotments adjacent to Hayling Lake on 2nd February (NP). They are 'fringe' birds around the pits complex, with the PBBS recording just two pairs, adjacent to Hayling Lake.

Tree sparrow

Thirty years ago, tree sparrows were abundant around the countryside around

Paxton. Now, sadly, they are a rarity. One, near Boughton Lodge Farm on 16th October, is the first record for several years (MD).

Brambling

A second consecutive poor winter for this Scandinavian visitor, with just two records: one near the Visitor Centre on 21st October (RP) and one in scrub adjacent to Heronry Lake on 19th January (MD).

Greenfinch

Greenfinches have become commoner locally in recent years, no doubt helped by



Chaffinch (John Busby)

Chaffinch

Abundant around the village and the pits complex throughout the year. Interesting observations were a dozen roosting near the Moorings on 14th January (NP) and a flock of 19 feeding on spilt grain along Haul Road on 13th April (JM).

Chaffinches are common visitors to village gardens and must breed abundantly. The PBBS recorded 42 pairs around the pits, a little down on the 46 pairs last year.

An interesting observation of behaviour comes from Ray Matthews (right)

their expertise on garden feeders. They are abundant breeders in the village. However, we receive few records from the Pits, aside from the PBBS, which recorded 17 pairs. Observations indicate that few feed on the bird tables at the Visitor Centre and Hayden Hide – presumably there is plenty of natural food around the reserve for most of the year.

A chaffinch flycatching?

One evening in mid May, I heard a brief call and caught a glimpse in the top of the *Robinia* tree. There was good reason to believe that the bird so skilfully plucking insects out of mid-air in the evening sun signalled the hoped-for return of our breeding flycatchers. But there was something ‘not quite right’ about its stance when perched - not ‘upright’ enough, its bill a little thick?

Grabbing the ‘bins’, I first felt disappointment (a female chaffinch!), then amazement; how could the normally pedestrian chaffinch manage so skilful a feat? A ‘one off’? No! For ten minutes, this enterprising chaffinch caught flies on the wing and carried them off to some nearby nest of youngsters. A bird that can’t even perch on our tube seed feeder (unlike greenfinch), demonstrated pinpoint accuracy, hovering, making instant changes in height, and executing 360 degree turns!

Goldfinch

The availability of weeds and thistles may be responsible for the increased sightings of goldfinches around the Pits. During the winter, flocks of 10 to 15 were regularly around Heronry Lake, Sailing Lake and the northern pits.

There were few records during the breeding season aside from 11 pairs estimated by the

PBBS. Post-breeding congregations were noted on seeding plants around Heronry South. Goldfinches seem to be an irregular visitor to village gardens.

Siskin

Two over Island Pit on 1st October (JW) were the first of the winter. A few fed, with redpolls and goldfinches, in alders around Sailing Lake during December and January, peaking at 30 on 19th January

(MSm). This flock was the last reported of the winter.

Linnet

Small numbers fed around the northern lakes during the winter, a flock of 30 on 30th December being the highest count (NP). A dusk roost near the Moorings in late winter peaked at 70 on 26th March (JW). Were these part of a spring movement back to their northern breeding grounds?

Just four pairs were estimated by the PBBS. In addition, a pair carried food to a nest near Boughton Lodge Farm in mid July (JW) and a pair almost certainly bred near the church.

Lesser redpoll

Six over Island Pit on 4th November (JW) were the first of the winter, and they soon habituated into their recent pattern of feeding in alders near Sailing Lake. The peak count was 24 on 27th December (JLFP), though at least a dozen remained into March. They occasionally fed on rosebay willowherb in front of Hayden Hide. The last of the winter were four on 16th April (NL).



Bullfinch (Rob Hume)

Bullfinch

Despite their shy nature, bullfinches were seen regularly through the winter, and were especially visible during the cold snap in late December. They were also regular visitors to some mature gardens in the village, usually in the early morning.

Virtually all the breeding season records come from the older lakes, with young seen

until late in August. The north of Haul Road, Heronry Lake and Washout Pit seemed to be the most favoured areas. The PBBS estimated 10 pairs, though 17 adults were ringed in the Sanctuary alone, so perhaps we underestimate the population. That stated, ringing also suggests that productivity was poor (see page 43).

Yellowhammer

Birds fed regularly with other finches and buntings on set-aside fields surrounding the Pits during the winter. A temporary roost, found in late December between the Moorings and Washout Pit, held a peak of 21 birds on 24th (NP), declining rapidly during late January, though in use again by 3 or 4 birds in late March (JW).

During the summer, singing males were recorded from Haul Road (3) and the western edge of New Workings, though breeding was only confirmed from the latter. The territory on the set-aside land close to the river was vacant this year, ironically only months before the land was purchased by Huntingdonshire District Council to benefit farmland songbirds.

Reed bunting

Bird feeders have proved popular with these 'farmland birds' in recent years. Those outside the Visitor Centre and in gardens neighbouring the Meadow hosted up to eight individuals during the winter.

The PBBS recorded 19 pairs around the Pits; 14 males were still singing in late June (RES). Several birds were seen carrying food and one was recorded distracting the observer's attention with a 'broken wing' display.

Corn bunting

The maximum count was just three birds (two singing males) around the northern pits in June, with one singing male on farmland adjacent to Haul Road during the PBBS. As reported in 2000, this attractive 'bird of the barley' is on the brink of local extinction.

Other species

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

Swan goose

Not, to most people's surprise, a hybrid between a mute swan and a greylag goose, this species is actually endangered in its native Asia. One escaped bird, with a silver ring marked 'R', was present around the pits for several months.

Snow goose

Although domesticated geese regularly mix with the flocks of greylag geese at Paxton, there was at least one feral snow goose (showing black wing tips) during August.

Ring-necked parakeet

One was seen in a village garden on 24th February (RM), and is presumed to have been an escape.

First summer migrants in Little Paxton and Paxton Pits

Julian Hughes

The arrival of the first summer migrants is long-awaited. It's always a special moment to hear your first chiffchaff or see your first swallow. To see the first migrants at Paxton Pits is even more special for regular visitors, however, and it becomes something of a race to find the first of each species, especially the first nightingale. The table below, which is updated annually, enables readers to check their own 'firsts' during 2002 – if you have, please let us know!

As the table shows, 2001 saw record earliest dates at Paxton for house martin (also a county record), swallow, blackcap, sedge warbler, yellow wagtail, reed warbler (also a county record), common tern and lesser whitethroat. This comes on top of record earliest dates for five species (house martin, blackcap, reed warbler, common tern and lesser whitethroat) in 2000. By contrast, some species were much later than usual, notably little ringed plover, whitethroat and turtle dove. Wheatears were almost entirely absent, with the first record more than a month after the usual first arrivals.

	Paxton 2001	Paxton earliest	Cambs earliest
House martin	4 March	4 March 2001	4 March 2001
Sand martin	9 March	2 March 1997	27 February 1994
Chiffchaff*	10 March	4 March 2000	*
Swallow	14 March	14 March 2001	7 March 1983
Blackcap*	19 March	19 March 2001	*
Little ringed plover	28 March	12 March 2000	7 March 1991
Willow warbler	30 March	9 March 1997	9 March 1997
Sedge warbler	1 April	1 April 2001	27 March 1989
Yellow wagtail	1 April	1 April 2001	16 March 1992
Nightingale	6 April	4 April 1999	4 April 1999
Reed warbler	7 April	7 April 2001	7 April 2001
Common tern	8 April	8 April 2001	20 March 1997
Lesser whitethroat	15 April	15 April 2001	31 March 1987
Wheatear	16 April	11 March 1996	7 March 1977/1989
Cuckoo	17 April	13 April 1991	8 March 1989
Whitethroat	21 April	11 April 1997	29 March 1998
Garden warbler	28 April	4 April 1997	28 March 1999
Hobby	28 April	21 April 1997/2000	31 March 1985
Swift	26 April	19 April 1996	14 April 1980
Turtle dove	4 May	12 April 1998	4 April 1982/1985

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

A Birdwatcher's Year

Trevor Gunton

Following many years as a voluntary information warden at Paxton Pits Visitor Centre, this article provides a seasonal introduction to the birdlife around the Pits.

Winter

Traditionally, the year begins with organised guided walks for families on New Year's Day, a chance to blow away the indulgences of the festive season and take in some fresh air. During the day, the focus is on the wildfowl, but as dusk approaches – from about 3.30 pm – the cormorant count begins from the Hayden Hide. In recent years, January counts have varied between 200 and 1000+ birds, depending on weather conditions. The harder the weather in East Anglia and the Netherlands, the more cormorants will be present in the roost on Heronry South Lake. On mild days in January and February, grey herons and cormorants start to repair the previous year's nests and begin displaying, though any sudden fall in temperature brings a temporary halt to such spring-like activity!

Wildfowl numbers peak at this time of year, with both Heronry North and South Lakes holding hundreds of birds, of more than a dozen species. From the Hayden Hide, birders can enjoy the sounds and sight of hundreds of shovellers, wigeons, gadwalls, tufted ducks and pochards – a glorious sight on a crisp, winter's afternoon. From the smaller Kingfisher Hide, perched on the spit in the centre of the two halves of Heronry Lake, small numbers of goosanders can usually be seen until late February, while magnificent goldeneyes will often remain into early April. Most of these ducks visit from northern Europe, as is the 'star' bird of the season, the smew. This small saw-billed duck has become something of a speciality at Paxton in recent years, with up to ten seen in some years, including 2001.

Those who stay until dusk can witness Paxton's greatest spectacle in the form of a huge roost of corvids alongside the cormorants. Up to 15,000 jackdaws, carrion crows and rooks stream into the trees to the west of Heronry South, most arriving from the southeast. The noise is tremendous on 'busy' evenings, and does not subside until it is completely dark.

Smaller species remain active throughout the winter, with the bird table and feeders next to the Hayden Hide providing rich pickings for thrush and finch species and the colourful great-spotted woodpecker is now a regular visitor. Even moorhens get on the table occasionally! Siskins and redpolls are worth looking out for in any group of alders, especially to the west of Sailing Lake.

Spring

As the blackthorn blossoms and the days lengthen, March sees breeding in full swing at the cormorant and grey heron colony. Great-crested grebes are in full display, with a lucky few birders witnessing the legendary 'weed-dance', and, by the second week, the first sand martins return from Africa. Chiffchaffs, some of which may have overwintered, and blackcaps are in full song by the end of March and marks the departure of many of the overwintering wildfowl, though some goldeneyes and wigeons remain into April, raising false hopes of breeding!

April is migration month, with the arrival of most of the outstanding visitors from Africa (see page 37 for the earliest dates). Each April begins with strong competition for the first sighting or sound of a swallow, house martin and – in particular – nightingale. Generally, the nightingale, another speciality Paxton bird, can be expected any time from the first week of April, when they are easier to see before the leaves blanket the trees and scrub in green.

Scrub is the preferred breeding location for this African songster, now so dependent on former gravel pits, but the song period is relatively short, with most over by the second week in June. On one evening in May, a special nightingale event, organised by the Club, enables hundreds of people to find out more about these enigmatic birds.

Spring also heralds the return of breeding waders and common terns. From mid March to early July, look out for little ringed plovers, especially on Washout Pit. Sailing Lake is a key wader area that, although not a part of the Local Nature Reserve, can be viewed from a permissive path around the north shore. Redshanks, ringed plovers, lapwings and – more recently – oystercatchers all breed on the islands or occasionally on the meadow to the south (so please avoid walking on it). Their success tends to depend on the length of the vegetation – long grass reduces the islands' attractiveness (and makes the nests difficult to count!), so efforts are made every winter to remove much of it. The common tern is the star bird of Sailing Lake, however, with 15-20 pairs each year on the smaller island. The displaying and feeding terns are, for me, one of the best sounds of the summer.

Summer

High summer is short, marked by the 'purring' sounds of the turtle dove around the mature trees at the southern end of the Pits complex. The other highlight is the sight of one or more hobbies that feed on large flying insects over the Pits or the Visitor Centre Meadow, although they do not breed on the reserve. Swifts, swallows and martins are occasionally taken by hobbies, though only sand martins breed at the Pits, in small colonies on the private quarry that is actively worked.

While many of us are looking forward to our summer holidays in early July, some species are already looking to return to their winter quarters. Common terns and adult swifts depart in July, with many others passing through the Pits. Exposed mud at the edge of the open gravel pits can attract other passage birds, such as common sandpipers, green sandpipers and greenshank – Washout Pit can be especially good.

Late summer can seem to be a quiet time, but it is a great time to observe young birds: cormorant families and juvenile grey herons learning to catch fish. Some waterbirds can breed quite late, with young great-crested grebes and tufted ducks having small young on their backs until well into August. In the scrub and woodland, small birds are busy rearing second broods or keeping low as their wing feathers moult in readiness for a long journey south or the coming winter fight for survival.

Autumn

The year has almost come full circle, but the amazing colours and bountiful fruits of the hedgerows provide a colourful backdrop to passage migrants and returning wildfowl. By mid August, dozens of pochards and tufted ducks have already arrived from Europe to Heronry North and Island Pits, and the first wigeons from Iceland arrive in September. Gadwalls and shovelers also return, though who knows from where?

The resident coots, such prolific breeders, no longer have it their own way – they dive down to collect pondweed, but the wigeons and gadwalls feed from the spoils as the seeds float to the surface of the water. Clever stuff!

There is usually someone around to help and advise the new visitor: call in at the Centre or visit the website before your walk to find out what is about. And let us know what you see afterwards – we are always interested. I have spent over 30 years around these Pits and there's always something new!

Wildlife at Paxton Pits 2001

Ian Dawson, Ron Elloway and Steve May

While we have good records of the status of birds at Paxton Pits, our knowledge of some of the other wildlife around the reserve has been more limited, though amateurs and professionals are working hard to improve our knowledge of some of the taxa. For example, surveys at Paxton Pits have added several new species of flies (Diptera) to the British list, found more than 180 species of fungus, 35 species of lichen and 29 species of gall. During 2001 alone, another eight vascular plants were added to the site records.

This paper attempts to record the status of some of the higher profile animal families. We do not pretend that it is complete; if you can add more detail, please send your records to Ron Elloway at the Visitor Centre or e-mail paxpits@paxton-pits.org.uk.

Mammals

Rabbits are the most frequently seen species, especially in the open, sandy areas near Hayden Hide. **Brown hare**, on the other hand, is scarce, with a maximum of three at any one time around the northern pits, though they could go undetected on the surrounding farmland. **Foxes** appear to have been more abundant this year, especially on the farmland around the northern lakes, and at least one family of cubs was observed. High water levels have ensured that the ground-nesting birds have not lost their clutches to foxes, **stoats** or **weasels**. The two mustelid species are enigmatic at Paxton, though weasels are occasionally reported crossing Haul Road and the Heronry Trail. **Badgers** are present, but scarce, with infrequent signs of them and even fewer sightings. At least two species of bat occur at Paxton, the **noctule** and the **pipistrelle** (though this has recently been 'split' into two species, which call at different frequencies, and it will require some ultrasonic surveys to determine whether we have both).

Two species, **otter** and **roe deer**, were reported during the year, though neither was confirmed. The status of otter continues to confuse, with increases throughout East Anglia during the last 20 years, but only occasional sightings from the lakes, usually during hard weather. It may be that there is insufficient food in the gravel pits to support a family of otters.

Three introduced species occur around the Pits. **Muntjac deer** are seen regularly, though probably occur at low density, since there is little evidence of browsing causing damage to the scrub or woodland. **Grey squirrels** are seen regularly in the mature trees between Heronry and Sailing Lakes, as well as in village gardens. **Mink**, also from North America, have been present around the reserve for more than a decade, but anecdotal observations suggest that they are less common than just five years ago. Two theories have been put forward: the increase in otters in the Ouse catchment (which may out-compete the mink for food), and Aleutian disease, a virus that can kill up to 98% of young mink and leave the adults in poor health. However, since there are few otter records from Paxton Pits

Muntjac (Rob Banbury)

and no reports of ill mink, it is too early to understand what is happening.



Of the small mammals, a survey confirmed the presence of **harvest mouse** at the Pits, which is good news as they are declining nationally. **Water shrews** were also surveyed in 2000 and were found in two areas; individuals were also observed in 2001. **Short-tailed field voles** are found in all areas of coarse grass, and have even been found on the Sailing Lake islands by

conservation work parties. We also know, from field observations, that **wood mouse** and **brown rat** are present around the lakes.

Reptiles

We received fewer reports of **grass snakes** than in previous summers – perhaps high water levels until May affected their hibernation sites? They are usually found in undisturbed, sandy areas, next to pools, and in garden ponds and compost heaps (BP). **Common lizard**, a species rarely recorded at Paxton, was seen twice: once in early spring and again during the summer.

Amphibians

No detailed surveys were undertaken this year, but information from surveys of the reserve's ponds in 2000 found **common newts** (also known as smooth newt) to be abundant in some ponds. The rarer **great-crested newt** was also present in one area in 2000 and 2001.

Common frogs are also present, but - like **common toads** - are rare, with few found during winter management work and a single batch of spawn noted in 2001. Small ponds are invaluable to these species and it is hoped that management work will achieve positive results.

Butterflies

The cool, wet early spring made it a poor year for many species, especially those that emerge early. Nevertheless, 23 of the 26 species recorded at the Pits occurred in 2001, though the first generations of several species almost completely failed. The first butterfly of the year was a **small tortoiseshell** on 3rd March. The **brimstone**, so often the first sign of spring, had a poor first generation, the first not appearing until 30th March. The second generation fared little better, though the mild autumn resulted in records until late October.

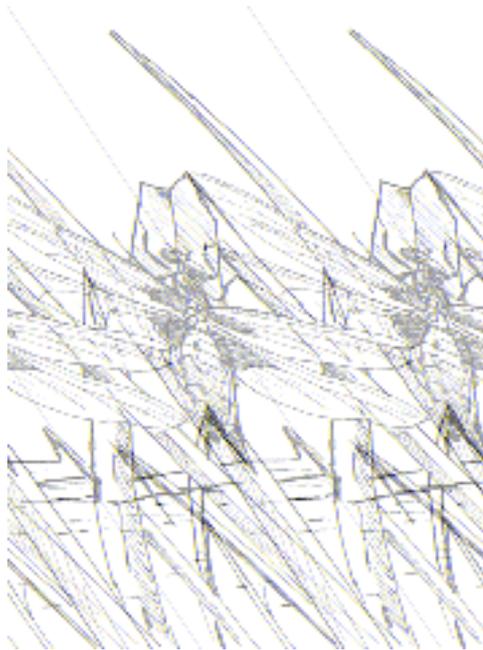
Peacocks had an average year, following the first sighting on 31st March, while the first **comma** on 7th April heralded a poor early season, though numbers picked up in late summer and early autumn. A week later, on 13th April, saw the first records of **holly blue**, but numbers were low, as the population recovered from a very poor year in 2000 (the species' fortunes is linked to the cycle of a parasitic wasp, which lays its eggs in holly blue caterpillars).

Early May brought out several common and widespread species, all of which had a good or average year. The first sightings of **green-veined white**, **orange tip** and **speckled wood** were all on 5th May; numbers of the last species seemed to peak late, well into September. The first generation of **common blue** was a virtual write-off, with just a handful around the reserve from 26th May, and the second-generation did poorly, too. June 4th was the first date for **large white**. There were good numbers of **meadow browns** this year, particularly on the Meadow and the grassy tracks around the pits complex – the first were on 24th June.

July is the main month for butterflies, with many species on the wing. The first **ringlets** were seen on 6th, **gatekeeper** on 8th, **large skipper**, **small skipper**, **red admiral** and **purple hairstreak** on 15th, **brown argus** and **Essex skipper** on 21st. It seemed to be a good year for red admirals and gatekeepers, but it was a disaster for brown argus. Hardly any first-generation butterflies were seen in May and there were few from this second-generation; look out next year on short grass, such as near the 'Mounds' overlooking the cormorant colony.

During July, two or three **marbled whites** were seen on the meadow between Lafarge Redland and the river, presumably from the colony founded near St Neots railway station in the early 1990s and now spreading down the valley. A single **painted lady**, a migrant from the near-continent, was adjacent to Island Lake on 3rd August, while a **small copper** on 11th September was one of very few records in Huntingdonshire this year. This last species is usually regular at Paxton Pits, so it clearly suffered a very poor season.

Following last year's bumper season, no clouded yellows were recorded this year; it is presumed that hard frosts during the winter killed any chances of the eggs laid around the northern lakes emerging as adults.



Dragonflies

Most of the dragonfly and damselfly species had a good season at Paxton Pits, affected much less by wet weather during the early season than the butterflies. The season starts in May, but did not really get going until June. All of the regulars were recorded, though **broad-bodied chasers** seemed to be scarcer than usual. This is one of six species of conservation concern in Cambridgeshire; four of the others were also recorded: **white-legged damselfly**, **hairy dragonfly**, **scarce chaser** and **large red damselfly**. Several large reds were recorded around Washout Pit during late May, the first records from the Pits complex since the early 1990s. Full details of the flight times of dragonflies and butterflies appear on www.paxton-pits.org.uk.

Broad-bodied chaser (Paul Young)

Spiders

The Little Paxton spider list stands at 148 species, though there are doubtless more to be found, since so few people are looking: 23 new records for Huntingdonshire have been found since 1999. The last published list for Huntingdonshire totalled 250 species (up to 1998). For comparison, Bedfordshire and Leicestershire have both been very well recorded and have 323 and 326 species respectively, which is just over 50% of the British spider fauna (around 640 species).

Among the finds are species never previously been recorded in Huntingdonshire, including several 'Notable B' species, recorded in fewer than 100 ten kilometre squares in the UK.

- *Theridion hemerobium*, a female and four males of this member of the Black Widow family. Prior to 1996, the only British records of this species were from Sussex, but since then individuals have been found in Leicestershire, Hertfordshire, Middlesex and Worcestershire, all next to water. All the previous records total 13 females and 3 males, so this find more than doubles the number of males recorded in the UK. Certainly the rarest spider found at Paxton so far.
- *Zilla diodia*, a small orb weaver spider, found at two sites on the reserve. A Notable B species, they usually occur south of the Thames and so are scarce in Huntingdonshire.
- *Philodromus albidus* (running crab spider), male and female found of this Notable B.
- *Euophrys aequipes*, a small, attractively marked jumping spider, rather uncommon nationally, found mainly in dry habitats in the south.
- *Porrhomma oblitum*, this Notable B money spider is not a new county record as it is also known from Woodwalton Fen.
- *Arctosa leopardus*, a local wetland wolf-spider, the 11th type found at Paxton, is another new Huntingdonshire record. Although showing no particular association with the coast,

there appear to are few records from landlocked counties. It is unknown in Bedfordshire, but has been recorded from Wicken Fen.

- *Lepthyphantes insignis*, a Notable B money spider, though it may be commoner than is realised as they live underground and disperse above ground at night (they have even been recorded from mole nests!).

Bird ringing at Paxton Pits

Graham Elliott

As Guy Thompson related in last year's *Report*, English Nature has given a group of licensed ringers permission to ring birds in the Sanctuary area of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve. Seventeen ringing visits were made between 1st April and 9th September 2001, as part of the Constant Effort Site (CES) scheme, organised by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO). The CES gathers information that can help to explain bird population changes, through a programme of mist-netting in specific habitats each summer. The data gathered from over 100 sites across the UK contributes to the BTO's Integrated Population Monitoring Programme.

During 2001, 390 birds of 25 species were caught and ringed, in addition to birds that were re-trapped, having been ringed here or elsewhere. As there is no data from previous years on which to base comparisons, a full interpretation of the results is not possible. However, it is clear from one year's data that the site holds good numbers of several common resident species, such as wren, dunnock and robin, and particularly good numbers of migrant nightingale, blackcap and chiffchaff.

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

The table below summarises the numbers of 'new' birds of each species ringed during 2001.

Species	Juvenile	Adult	Total
Turtle dove	0	1	1
Kingfisher	1	1	2
Green woodpecker	1	0	1
Wren	18	11	29
Dunnock	13	13	26
Robin	17	11	28
Nightingale	1	16	17
Blackbird	2	14	16
Song thrush	1	7	8
Sedge warbler	1	8	9
Reed warbler	7	10	17
Lesser whitethroat	7	8	15
Whitethroat	3	4	7
Garden warbler	11	9	20
Blackcap	24	26	50
Chiffchaff	14	16	30
Willow warbler	2	23	25
Goldcrest	0	1	1
Long-tailed tit	3	14	17
Blue tit	5	8	13
Great tit	13	12	25
Chaffinch	1	4	5
Greenfinch	0	5	5
Bullfinch	4	17	21
Reed bunting	0	2	2
Total	149	241	390

The ringing has provided useful additional information by which to assess the populations of some species. Even though the ringing site occupies only a small area of the Pits complex, the numbers of lesser whitethroats and bullfinches caught were much higher than was predicted solely from field observations. While most of the species caught were typical of dry scrub, turtle dove, kingfisher and green woodpecker were all surprises when pulled from the mist nets.

Productivity of each species is difficult to estimate on the basis of just one year's data, as we have nothing with which to compare it. However, the table illustrates how few juvenile nightingales and willow warblers were caught. This is probably typical for nightingale, as juveniles are known to be difficult to catch, but the low numbers of juvenile willow warblers is worrying in view of the species' continuing national decline. Of the resident breeding birds, very few juvenile song thrushes, bullfinches or long-tailed tits were trapped suggesting a poor breeding season. By contrast, both blackcap and chiffchaff appear to have had a good breeding season.



Song thrush (Rob Banbury)

A number of birds were trapped during the year that already carried rings. Many of these were birds that had been ringed at Paxton during the trial sessions in 2000, including the only adult nightingale ringed that year (a female). However, four birds had been ringed elsewhere.

N545848 Blackcap	ringed:	Godmanchester	18 June 2000
	controlled:	Little Paxton NR	5 May 2001
N545514 Garden Warbler	ringed:	Godmanchester	4 July 1999
	controlled:	Little Paxton NR	12 May 2001
N555144 Garden Warbler	ringed:	Fen Drayton GP	23 July 1999
	controlled:	Little Paxton NR	12 May 2001
P615107 Blackcap	ringed:	Wick, Highland	21 Sept 2000
	controlled:	Little Paxton NR	21 April 2001

The first three 'controls' (birds ringed and then subsequently caught by another ringer) are all birds that returned to the same general area, with both the garden warblers in at least their third year. The blackcap P615107 may have been a bird returning to northern Scotland to breed, or just possibly a Scandinavian migrant that was caught in Scotland on autumn and spring migration in Cambridgeshire.

It is too early to report on the whereabouts of any of the 390 birds ringed this year. Many will, of course, die during their first year; some will make it back in 2002 and, if we're lucky, some might even be re-caught. We'll report on any of these recaptures in future issues of the Report, but one notable returnee from 2000 was a juvenile nightingale, ringed at Paxton last year, which was caught at Bainton gravel pits near Peterborough on 5 June 2001.

Photographs of some of the birds ringed during 2001 are published on www.paxton-pits.org.uk

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