

WHITACRE HEATH NATURE
RESERVE (SSSI)

ANNUAL REPORT 1996

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1996 - A review of the year

Weather

The year began and ended with prolonged periods of snow and freezing temperatures with the months in-between being generally dry, leading to a full year without a life-bringing flood coming to the reserve.

From mid-January to mid-February, the whole country was subject to a big freeze with a moderate fall of snow on the 27th January. This cold period led to a mild week at the end of February, before the cold weather returned with winds from the east for most of March.

Spring was fairly cool on the whole, lasting well into May, with a late isolated snowfall on the 12th April.

The summer finally arrived at the start of June, with long hot, sunny days, interspersed with the odd thundery shower, though with little significant rainfall. This weather carried on almost to the end of October, when it ended in a short period of strong gales and rain.

From the middle of November, the snow returned with a fall of 2-3 inches on the 19th, starting a pattern of moderate snowfalls followed by thaws that carried on to the end of the year. Sadly, the amount of snow that fell was too little to raise the river level much and we ended the year without a trace of wildfowl on the reserve.

Reserve management

Due to another year with below-average rainfall, most areas were accessible, allowing significant work to be done:

- a) In August through to October, a vast area of encroaching willow scrub was removed from the left side of Main Pool, both in front of and behind the bank. This was done to increase the pool area and to encourage development of the phragmites. It should also facilitate the deepening of the pool in later years. In September, during the clearance work at the back of the pool, a fire took hold underground in the marsh to the left of River Pool, resulting in the clearance of a small area of reed and forming a depression in the ground.
- b) In November, the path heading down from Main hide to Middle Path was redirected to drop its height below the bank to avoid disturbance to birds on the pool.
- c) The abandoned crane was removed from its resting place on the riverbank below the scrape following an agreement with Mr Fox to exchange the crane for work with one of his bulldozers in 1997. Shortly afterwards, the original owners of the crane, Demoulder, came forward to claim it back many years after abandoning it. The matter was left in the hands of the Trust to settle.

Effect of previous management work

- a) The work done in 1995 on the scrape was very disappointing and will require further work in the future. The deep pits that were created worked well, creating good habitat for water plants, aquatic invertebrates and dragonflies, but these were too small in area to benefit wildfowl and too steep in profile for waders. The shallow profile of the main area proved to be not deep enough and had dried up by the end of May.
- b) The work done on opening up back path produced an all-too-brief display of Southern Marsh Orchids, some 20+ plants in total, which fell victim to the voracious appetites of the resident rabbits.
- c) By removing the willow scrub from the back of main pool, a good number of wildfowl were encouraged early in the year, before the pool dried up.
- d) The new hide overlooking the flashes has led to some interesting records being received, with sightings of species such as Garganey, Green Sandpiper, Ruff, Dunlin, Jack Snipe and possible breeding Lapwing and Redshank. If success is to be achieved with these breeding species though, action will need to be taken to control both the grazing cattle numbers and the predation by corvids.
- e) The work done at the top end of the birch woodland has shown little benefit this year.
- f) Redirecting the path from behind the feeding station has reduced disturbance in winter and the formation of pollards has progressed.
- g) Little pollard growth has been observed at the edge of the Severn Trent field, following the felling of the large, overhanging willows.

In general, the work carried out has shown some benefits fairly quickly, but for some projects it is rather too soon to see any significant improvement, such as the work on the woodland and besides Severn Trent field, both of which were done late in 1995.

Highlights of the year

A very interesting and exciting winter and spring period, giving some indication of the potential the reserve has if water levels could be controlled:

- January** A brief sighting of a **Bittern** on the 6th, flushed from the sedge near Dragonfly pools. A flock of some 25 **Redpoll** frequented the alders on the reserve from January through to March, often with one or two **Mealy Redpoll** (*C.f.flammea*). A pair of **Goosander** was reported from Main Pool on 13th. A **Merlin** flew through Ross' Rough on the 27th, with the first reserve record of **Jack Snipe** being found in front of the Flashes hide the following day.
- February** Two **Buzzards** flew over the reserve on the 27th whilst a **Ringed Plover** visited the Flashes briefly on the 29th.

- March** A **Stonechat** lingered around the Flashes hide area for a couple of days on 2nd and 3rd, a good start to an exciting month. Two male and three female **Pintail** paid a short visit to Main Pool on 16th, when 3 **Dunlin** also turned up on the Flashes, one bird lingering until the 19th. The 19th also saw the arrival of a fairly long-staying **Ruff** to the same area; finally departing on the 27th. A flock of around 50 **Meadow pipits** lingered on Ross's Rough and the Flashes for the last two weeks of the month. The first **Wheatear**, of what was a very good year for this species, showed up on Ross's Field on the 24th (a female). Sightings of single males and females carried on until early May, with a peak of 2 males and 1 female on 24th April. Finally, a pair of **Garganey** were seen on the pool on the Flashes on the 31st, just before they took off and flew towards Ladywalk.
- April** 3 **Goosander** flew over the Flashes on the 4th, whilst a pair of both **Redshank** and **Lapwing** were observed displaying and copulating in the same area. A pair of **Lapwing** also started nesting on Severn Trent Field. A **House Sparrow** in the roadside hedge on the 10th was interesting for its' rarity value on the reserve list as was a **Ring-necked Parakeet** flushed from Ross' Rough on the 20th. Warm sunny conditions the following day saw a female **Marsh Harrier** glide over the reserve.
- May** Each year usually brings a single sighting of **Lesser Whitethroat**, and this year proved no exception with one found singing in the car park on the 5th. A **Greenshank** frequented the scrape from the 14th until the 17th, giving a fly-past to visitors during a guided walk. Two **Hares** seen on the 28th at the Scrape were also worthy of note.
- June** A **Grey Squirrel** was first sighted in June and was an unwelcome resident for the rest of the year, becoming a nuisance later on when it discovered the easy pickings of the feeding station. A **Hobby** flying through on the 19th was a more exciting and welcome visitor.
- July** As the hot dry spell took a grip, a single **Buzzard** passing over was the sole highlight.
- August** Butterflies were the main players in this month with single **Clouded Yellows** being seen on 2nd, 15th and 26th. A **Holly Blue** on the 15th provided the single record of this scarce annual visitor.
- September** A **Buzzard** flew over on the 4th, whilst the autumn passage of **Yellow Wagtails** peaked at 25 birds on Ross's Rough/Flashes on the 10th. A **Little Owl** was found frequenting Ross' Rough and the Flashes areas from 25th - 30th, though due to the small number of visitors to the reserve, especially at dusk, it could not be determined whether this bird was resident for longer. A large flock, almost 200 strong and comprising mainly **Greenfinch** with a few **Linnet** built up on Ross' Field, feeding on Rape Seed during the month. A **Grey Wagtail** on the 29th must have seemed somewhat out of place on the dried-up landscape of the Scrape.
- December** **Grey Partridge** are scarce, but regular, visitors to the reserve; however, a count of 13 on the Flashes on the 3rd was exceptional.