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RSPB Old Hall Marshes Update

Old Hall Marshes are part of the Blackwater Estuary RSPB reserve. The site is part of the Blackwater Flats and Marshes, a key site in this Nature Conservation area. It is proposed as part of a special Protection Area under the EEC Directive on the Conservation of wild Birds (Directive 79/409/EEC). It is also proposed as a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar convention.

Old Hall Marshes are composed of a large area of grazing marsh almost completely surrounded by intertidal mudflats and salt marsh, together with more restricted habitats such as sea wall and brackish dykes. The central core of agriculturally unimproved neutral grassland represents the largest remnant of traditionally managed reclaimed grazing marsh in eastern England, whilst an associated area of reed bed is the largest in Essex. This large block of marsh, along with areas of improved grassland at the western end of the site, supports eleven species of birds in nationally important numbers, with two of these species also reaching levels of international significance. The diverse range of habitats also supports 284 species of vascular plants including 20 nationally scarce species. The invertebrate fauna is similarly rich, including at least 4 Red Data Book species and 37 notable species.

The site supports internationally important numbers of wintering Dark-bellied Brent Geese (typically around 2% of the total world population), and of migrating Ringed Plover. A further seven species of wildfowl and wader reach nationally important numbers in winter: Curlew, Dunlin, Goldeneye, Grey Plover, Shelduck, Teal and Wigeon. Great Cob Island is one of a number of well established roosting areas within the site. The central area of grazing marsh is a locally important wintering area for Hen Harrier.

Old Hall Marshes are situated west of West Mersey, north east of Tollesbury, on the B1023. **Access to the site is by permit only** although visual access can be obtained from the sea wall.

May - June 2011 Highlights

Habitat Management

The cows from the barn were released onto the grazing marsh in May, after three previous escape attempts were foiled. They were supplemented by about 120 brought back from the grazier's farm, and soon decimated the grass which struggled to recover due to the very dry spring. Rainfall in June has helped it to recover sufficiently. Despite the dry weather, water levels in most of the main wader feeding areas (Bale field, Irongate, low-ways in the grazing marsh) have held up well.

Birds

A mixed breeding season: wildfowl numbers very similar to last year, bearded tits and Cetti's warblers also holding their own. At least five marsh harrier nests look set to fledge young and a bumper year for black-headed gulls: 489 nests recorded on Great Cobb Island (including at least one Med gull), though how many fledge, what with flooding from high tides and predation is another matter. Oystercatchers 87pr (65 in 2010), redshank 87.5pr (123), lapwing 51pr (75), avocet 48pr (64), common tern 39pr (14). In addition to wader numbers falling, predation has been a major problem with 68% of lapwing nests predated at the egg stage. For avocet and common tern mostly nesting in a colony on Irongate Island, predation at the chick stage took its toll with marsh harrier being a major culprit, probably helped by fox. E.g. on 14/06 there were 11 common tern chicks, one of which was taken by a marsh harrier during counting; by 16/06 there were none. Shelters in the form of tubes were put out, but these appear to have been of no help to the nests which remained. Better shelters are planned for next year. Another rollercoaster ride has been provided by the little terns. Great effort was put into protecting the area from disturbance, though the terns did not at first seem grateful, appearing in the estuary, but not settling down to nest until the end of June (4pr). At this point a disturbance incident did occur despite our efforts, and they deserted. However, the previous major cause of disturbance which was a local sailing school have been very cooperative this year, for which we are very grateful, and we are at least making progress in our protection of the site. Three spoonbills have been hanging around at Pennyhole Bottom, exciting visitors with mutual preening and moving sticks about, but to no end as far as we can tell. Common crane was seen on 13/05 (for two minutes), and a glossy ibis popped in for half an hour on 09/05 (never to be seen again).

Other Flora and Fauna

Particular effort was put into searching for the locally common, but nationally scarce Sloe Carpet moth. Trapping produced a peak of 22 individuals on one night. The planned search night for adults proved rather chilly and unsuccessful. It was noted that many species were flying early in the hot weather, and a search for larvae, aided by local expert Don Down, slightly earlier than first planned produced two individuals. No great advancement in knowledge of the species, though lessons were learnt for next year.

Staff

The 2011-12 Eastern England Interns were recruited and started in March. Lizzie Bruce starts her internship at Old Hall, and is getting on very well apart from falling victim to the ankle curse of Old Hall. However, it wasn't long before she was up and about, raring to do breeding bird surveys. A plethora of new local volunteers joined the team as little tern monitoring and protection assistants.

January - February 2011 Highlights

Habitat Management

In grazing marsh compartment 3 east culverts have been put in by contractor James Elderton to aid our movement around the reserve and join up low ways to improve (ie slow) drawdown rates in one area. A small bund was also created to retain water in the field more effectively. Reedbed cutting was finally completed. The car park, signs, etc and other general maintenance got underway, and three new sets of steps up the sea wall were installed. The battle with *Crassula helmsii* continues in the office pond with a sea water relay race against the tide now being the preferred way of collecting water. The sheep have tidied up the sea walls nicely and were pregnancy scanned in February.

Birds

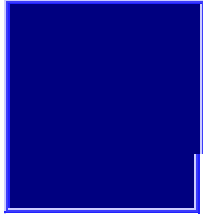
A peak of 5 great northern divers were seen on 02/02 and single Slavonian grebes have been seen throughout. Barnacle geese continued to be present to the end of Feb, peak 94 03/01. Peaks of dark bellied Brents were 2600 05/01 and 1380 24/02 on the improved fields. Black brants were spotted 6 times between 14/01 and 18/02, and a pale belly on 07/02. A Bewick's swan was seen on 30/01. 03/01 was a good day for sea ducks: 14 common scoter, 16 eiders, 42 red-breasted mergansers and 17 goldeneyes. A pair of scaup have been coming and going throughout the period. A peak of 183 pochard were present on 21/02. The resident barn owls and local peregrines continue to be seen almost daily. The only short-eared owl this year was on 17/02. No hen harriers have been found roosting in Jan and Feb, though there have been sporadic sightings of ringtails throughout. A peak of 12 marsh harriers roosting was found in January. A common buzzard was spotted on 27/02 and on 18/01 a possible rough-legged buzzard. Single merlins have been seen throughout. Kestrels, conspicuous by their absence during the very cold weather, reappeared in January. One unfortunate individual was found dead in a new owl box when checking for pellets. Wader highlights include 369 avocet 21/02, 470 blackwits 19/01, 2,364 dunlin 24/01, 1,864 grey plover 04/02, 3,000 lapwing 07/02, 370 knot 03/01, a greenshank 02/02 and 2 sightings of woodcock in February. There have been 3 sightings of bittern this year, all in January. Two corn buntings were seen on 11/02.

Other Flora and Fauna

Brown hares have been the star of the show in this department, with a peak of 28 spotted on 08/02, and many reports of them chasing round and boxing. Moth trapping crept off to a slow start with 5 species recorded so far this year.

Staff

Thankfully all staff are now fit and well, though the title 'reserve invalid' passed to one of the cows. Somehow she managed to flay about a square foot of skin off, leaving it flapping about and prone to infection. After isolation, daily care, several expensive vet bills for the grazier, and a stint back at his farm, 'Mumsy' is now doing well and will be rejoining us soon. Residential volunteer Mike Andrews left at the end of February for a break then more



volunteering at Lake Vyrnwy (assuming RSPB will still be there).

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