

Stockbridge Report 2003

What a glorious year. Great weather and great birds brought more visitors to the Reserve. Hopefully, a lot more of the Group's membership will come down to see what a fantastic place Stockbridge has become. The birds might not all come into view at once but forty or so species is possible in a morning or afternoon's visit although patience is required as it's often in the last ten minutes of a visit that something special appears. Remember, you're not restricted to the hide as there are various paths to explore although care must be taken when venturing out and about.

The management team of volunteers; Shaun Radcliffe, Margaret and Peter Riley and myself continue to come down to the Reserve on Sunday mornings to work on various tasks, supported by other members of the Group.

The spread of Himalayan Balsam continues unabated in the valley and is getting quite bad on the opposite bank of the river, however, the Japanese Knotweed in the top North-western corner of the Reserve is being controlled with regular cutting and spraying, The grass on the far side of the scrape is now strimmed regularly and it is very encouraging that this winter has already provided more Water Rail and Snipe records than for quite a number of years. We just need the summer waders to come and feed or, hope against hope, nest on the edge of the scrape or in the 'triangle' area.

The Stockbridge Sunday 'Funday ' on 18th May 2003 was a success with pond dipping and plenty of warblers being seen as well as a Grasshopper Warbler putting on display of "hear me bet you can't see me".

January 2003

The year started with a movement of Black-headed Gulls going west. In a two-hour spell 566 birds flew past. A great deal of work has been spent in preparing the fringes of the scrape with a large triangle shape cleared directly opposite the hide. This brought rewards of good sightings of Water Rail and Snipe with one record of three rails and a Snipe feeding in the triangle. Altogether there were eight records for Snipe, all of them of single birds except for one occasion when a pair were seen. A "bobbing" bird seen on 25th was, unfortunately, not a jack! The rails at times betrayed their presence with both the "chipping" and, less often, the "pig squealing" calls, when not providing excellent views from the hide.

Winter thrush numbers were poor, producing a maximum record of only 12 Fieldfare and Redwing counts did not even reach double figures. During very cold weather on 7th the reserve was visited very briefly by 60 Brambling, staying for only ten minutes. The frozen conditions also brought a small flock of 13 Lapwing past with three more birds seen a few days later. Despite the scrape being iced up a Kingfisher managed to catch fish from the narrow ice-free fringe next to the willows. Blue Tit and Mallard were also seen mating – though not to each other I hasten to add! Although there were only single records for Goldcrest, Bullfinch and Redpoll, these helped the month's total reach a respectable 45 species.

February

Snipe records remained consistent with the same number of sightings as last month but this time there was a record of three birds. Although this remains a small number it was most encouraging to those that work on the reserve. Surprisingly Water Rail was not recorded again until next month and only a single Brambling put in an appearance but Reed Buntings amounted to eight birds. Again the improved fringes produced a pair of Teal for four days and the three Grey Partridges seen feeding next to the gravel beach was a real plus. Interesting entries made on 23rd were of two Stock Dove, six House Sparrow, six Dunnock and twenty-nine Greenfinch, which were feeding on the rosehips.

A Chaffinch came to the feeder bearing unusual yellow wing bars. Siskin remained in small flocks of half a dozen or so but many records were of just single birds. Redwing flocks of 30 were seen on 22nd and 23rd. It is not easy to establish how many types of fish are in the scrape but a reddish fish seen being caught by a Grey Heron was almost certainly a carp. The first Oystercatcher flew through on 25th and a pair of Mute Swan arrived to claim breeding territory from 17th onwards. Besides using the reserve and being seen regularly, Moorhen also fed in the adjacent field up river and all together thirteen were counted this month. Other records were of 71 Woodpigeon seen on 1st going northwest and a visit of two Coal Tits brought the species count for the year up to 52.

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March

It was interesting to watch the pair of Mute Swans act out their courtship and eventually choose a nest site. The male showed aggressive posturing towards the Canada Geese who also fancied the reserve as a potential home and a juvenile swan was made most unwelcome each time it landed, that is when it was even allowed to land! Observers enjoyed seeing the ritual of "mirroring" on 16th whilst the day before the birds were busy making a nest amongst the common reed near the drain area. Mating was noted on 30th but by then their nest site had been stolen by the geese, who were not to be moved! Evidence of the move towards spring was noted by a Chiff-chaff seen in the willows in front of the hide on 1st and six Oystercatchers flying up the valley on 7th. Blue Tits were busily clearing out the nestbox on the left side of the hide and male Reed Buntings were in superb plumage. Coot numbers increased with six and seven Moorhen were reported with both lots of birds causing the usual rumpus in fighting for nest sites amongst the reed mace. Coot were mating on 6th and 16th and on nest by 28th. Redwing were still recorded with 35 birds on 2nd but other records were of single figures whereas Fieldfare were only recorded twice. Water Rail was not seen this month but still heard on three dates and Snipe records of just a single bird on two dates. A Curlew was seen feeding in the playing fields on 23rd and that same day the first Sand Martin circled the reserve and then flew back East. Earlier, two Redshank flew past going west and the following week it was probably the same birds that fed in the triangle area, a rewarding record for the workers at Stockbridge.

April

There was an awful amount of activity at the reserve this month. The Mute Swans settled down to nest building in reed mace close to the gardens. Mating was observed on 5th and the female Canada Goose was now sitting. To observers amusement there now started an almost daily ritual by the males patrolling their areas of control. An imaginary line stretched across the water and if the swan wondered too near the gander's area it caused a lot of strutting and posturing and the swan would retreat. Likewise should the goose stray it would be the cob's turn to react. The reserve was visited again by a Redshank on 5th but was immediately frightened off by a Moorhen although a pair came back on 22nd and 23rd. Although this month recorded the influx of most of the summer migrants, a Brambling was recorded on 12th calling constantly. Two Swallow were seen on 13th, a late date and a Willow Warbler was also noted. A male Blackcap was singing by 20th, heralding the arrival of the first House Martin. The next day Linnets called in and a Sedge Warbler was heard calling from behind the hide. Garden Warbler sang from the big bird cherry on 26th and seven Swift were counted. The most interesting record for a migrant was on 18th when a Grasshopper Warbler was heard reeling in the area to the right of the triangle. It was thought the same bird later moved near to the small pond but then another bird started up to the left of the beach. One of the birds was seen on 27th in the beach area but the view was very brief due to the dense undergrowth. The secretive nature of the birds kept observers guessing for some time to whether breeding was a possibility. Other interesting records this month was Song Thrush carrying nest material to the base of a bird cherry and a Chaffinch already sitting, although this nest was later abandoned. The female Coot was on nest by 5th and a Green Woodpecker's call was heard from the canal area, whilst birders had the spectacle of two male Pheasants sparring. A pair of Teal used the triangle area to feed.

May

More migrants arrived with both Common and Lesser Whitethroat seen on 3rd, the latter was of two birds passing through the Aire Valley on a typical date. Grasshopper Warbler records of calling birds continued sporadically throughout the month but interest now was on a pair of Linnets. Initially three birds arrived on 2nd where upon a male started singing from the top of the gorse, close to the hide. A female began taking dry grass into the gorse bush and hopes of breeding were high. The birds also inspected the raspberry canes area but the gorse seemed favourite with the female seen carrying a feather into the bush. The birds were noted up to 10th but not recorded again until 21st when the male was seen singing again. The pair remained close to the gorse right up to the end of the month and hopes remained high. The Pheasants continued fighting so it was not surprising when a male was seen with a broken tail feather on 4th. Boys will be boys! Two male Reed Bunting took up territories calling continuously whereas the swans proudly showed their four cygnets by 21st. The geese had already gone one better with five goslings on 2nd. Time to say aahh. A visiting Kingfisher took his successful catch down river but a juvenile was seen with an adult by 20th. Also on the river was a copperhead Goosander, escorting her five ducklings on 18th. Many of

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the nest boxes dotted about the reserve were in full use by Blue and Great Tits. Juvenile Dunnocks appeared with their parents who were frantically searching and providing food for them. Oystercatchers dropped in with up to five birds flying up and down the Aire Valley. The aerial acrobatics of a Sand Martin was noted with a bird picking up a feather in mid air, dropping it and swooping to collect it again just above the water. A Blackcap was also observed carrying nesting material into the raspberry patch and a Robin taking food to its young.

June

It has been difficult in having to restrict some of the records made for this month in this report because the reserve was literally a thriving breeding area. The cygnets continued to grow with assistance from the adults. This help at times took the form of the adults positioning themselves in fairly shallow water and "puddling" the bottom with their feet, which released materials to the surface for the young to consume. A Kestrel was a regular visitor to the reserve often perched on the power lines looking for prey. After one such successful swoop, the bird rose up with a catch in its beak and whilst flying swapped the food from beak to talons in one quick movement. Also recorded was an interesting sight of a Whitethroat coming out of the undergrowth with a large caterpillar, obviously to feed to young. Before setting off to the nest the adult flew up to the barbed wire and (in Kingfisher fashion) started to stun the caterpillar by striking it against the wire. Juvenile Blue Tits, Dunnocks and Willow Warblers were all noted plus a Garden Warbler with two young. Whilst some Whitethroats fed their young other birds were displaying again. There were two Sedge Warblers singing on territory but sadly the Linnets left without breeding on 13th. Up to their departure the two birds had remained close to the gorse bush so this was a disappointment. A Common Sandpiper circled the water on 29th but moved on, however, Oystercatchers continued to visit the reserve for feeding. Up to eight birds were seen one day, as there were three birds on the beach whilst another five flew West. During one visit, a young Oystercatcher was noted a being lighter coloured than normal with a dull orange bill. There were two families of Moorhen but probably the best breeding record was on the 29th. The observers had been watching a young Reed Bunting which was perched at the top of a pile of dead willow cuttings when suddenly a warbler appeared from within the pile, turned and showed a round tail with spotting underneath. The top half of the bird was a uniformed olive brown, the lower parts slightly darker - a juvenile Grasshopper Warbler!! The year list reached 75 with Jay, Tufted Duck and Herring Gull added as new species for the year.

July

Records for hirundines were very poor with neither Swallow nor Sand Martin reaching double figures. House Martin had only one record, which was of a single bird. Coot continued nest building and Grasshopper Warbler kept up reeling whilst it was noted Blackcap started singing again from the drainage area. Song Thrush were still feeding young but Sedge Warblers had fledged with a family seen on 6th. Painting the hide green made it too well camouflaged as a juvenile Willow Warbler almost flew in through the open window. A good record turned up on 13th when an adult Whinchat was seen on the football pitches. With the grass uncut the bird typically perched on the top of dock, which stood out above the long grass. It was later seen on the wall on the west side of the reserve. Five immature Mallard arrived during the month but this year there was noticeable by the absence of ducklings. The Mute Swan family left on 9th now reduced from four to just two cygnets. Canada geese in the area fared better with up to 15 birds feeding next to the river in the farmer's field at times. The triangle attracted a juvenile Lapwing on 25th and a pair of Tufted Duck stayed one day. The same also applied to two Grey Wagtail but Black-headed Gulls were returning in large numbers with 100 by the end of the month. A female Pheasant showed off her three juveniles and swift numbers peaked at 32, flocking up ready for departing soon. A juvenile Great Spotted Woodpecker visited the feeder but that area also attracted a Sparrowhawk, which took a Dunnock.

August

Although most warblers remained, other migrants had other ideas. Swifts were gone by 10th and Garden Warbler was last recorded in the previous month. Grasshopper warbler was heard again on just one day, the 2nd. The month contained three dates when Willow Warbler was noted and 10th produced four Whitethroat on a day of stormy weather, the thunderstorm also bringing down 55 House Martin. The numbers of Blue Tit reached thirteen on 28th but Great Tit numbers were much lower. A Little Grebe stayed from 16th onwards and a good record for the reserve was of a juvenile Bullfinch. The Mallard evening roost only totalled a maximum of 58 birds, a fairly poor

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number. Chiff-chaff called on 31st but the month did not produce any new species to the year list. A Lesser Black-backed Gull hit the power cables and plunged into the scrape but survived after recovering from the impact. It tried to stand up but was at first visibly confused and lost its balance. Another injured bird was a female Mallard. She had a disfigured wing and could not fly but stayed throughout the remaining months surviving by hiding in the reeds situated close to the feeding station. By month end, Blackbirds had started to strip the mountain ash berries.

September

Garden Warbler was heard singing from the elderberries where a Common Whitethroat was seen enjoying the berries. On the 20th a family of Greenfinches came to the feeders, the young still begging for food from the adults. On the first day of the month two Fieldfare were seen amongst Mistle Thrushes, an exceptionally early date. A welcome return was a Water Rail on 3rd with a second by 20th. These birds can at times remain quiet all day then suddenly start squealing to give away their presence. This was the case one morning, when, after a period of complete quiet, nearby "neighbours" decided to throw pieces of bread from their garden into the water, to feed the Mallards etc. This action immediately provoked the rails into squealing from the undergrowth. It wasn't clear whether they were annoyed or pleased! Jays are not seen at the reserve very often so to have two birds feeding in a rowan was a good record. Three more flew west the next day suggesting some movement of the species (acorn crop failure?). Single Blackcaps kept turning up whereas the Little Grebe was joined by another on 20th causing at times a dispute between them over fishing rights. Eventually three birds were recorded. A skein of about 100 Pinkfooted Geese flew over the reserve heading up the Worth valley. Other records of interest were of a fight between a Robin and a Chiff-chaff, and a Song Thrush taking a shower by flapping its wings in the long grass, the grass being heavy with dew. Latest dates for birds leaving – Sedge Warbler 3rd, House Martin & Common Whitethroat 14th, Sand Martin 16th, Garden Warbler 21st and Swallow 28th.

October

With the autumn season now here Redpoll came to feed on Rosebay Willowherb and Meadowsweet seed heads. A dozen birds were recorded on 5th and 12th. Last dates for departing migrants in this month were - Chiff-chaff 12th and Willow Warbler 16th. Water Rail was recorded throughout the month, noted on nine occasions with sometimes two birds involved. However, nearly all records were of calling birds with only one actual sighting. A Snipe was seen on two dates but Mistle Thrush numbers only reached 18, the days of flocks of 30 plus seen are gone. Little Grebe remained with still up to three birds at times, however bird of the month was a juvenile Wigeon, which was seen grazing on the opposite bank on 26th for just the day. Another duck, a male Teal, visited on 19th. An uncommon species to the reserve is Bullfinch so three sightings this month was noteworthy, one record was of a pair. Reed Bunting numbers rose to six whilst 20 Redwings were seen on 16th. This species, at times, came down to bathe below the willows. Fieldfare numbers were low except for a flock of 66 on one occasion. The annual year list was now 78 after including the Wigeon.

November

Sightings of Water Rail improved this month as observers were spoilt with views on at least four occasions. Winter brought more visits from Kestrel with nine entries for the species but Sparrowhawk was recorded just twice. A Cormorant flew west up the valley on 16th and a week later a Brambling was seen. Siskin flocks are usually recorded on alders on the riverbank but the trees on the embankment have now matured so birds are now seen closer to the hide, spilling on to the feeder station close by. The largest flock was of 40 birds on 16th. There were three Goldcrest and four Souse Sparrow recorded which was good as both species are not by any means regular to the reserve. The single Snipe remained and was recorded on three dates feeding at the fringes. A male Teal visited the reserve on two dates. Other interesting records were flocks of 45 and 60 of Fieldfare, a dozen Greenfinch feeding on rosehips during very cold weather and a Black-headed Gull chasing off a Kingfisher. One observer made the following entry about a Pheasant – "strange but true, the bird put its bill to the ground and ran backwards twice". To what purpose, nobody knows.

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December

The strimmed triangle area appealed to the two Lapwing using it on 6th, as did Snipe and Water Rail. Snipe numbers doubled to two and they stayed all through December. Most records in the last five years were of flushed birds but this year observers have enjoyed seeing them feeding so maybe the habitat is now in line with their needs. The Starling roost was up to 200, perched as usual on the power lines close by. The year list was thought complete by now but the disturbance of a bird next to the riverbank was a real find. Whilst checking a newly planted area a Woodcock shot out from its cover and flew high over the industrial site on the opposite bank of the river. This brought the year list to 79 unless you can count another new bird to the reserve, which is much less interesting, to bring the total to 80. A Muscovy Duck took up residence this month (and remained), to enjoy the free meals around the feeder station areas. Other records of note were of nineteen Common Gulls on 21st, two Brambling on 25th and 27th, a Bullfinch also on 25th and three Teal on 28th. Another 'bobbing' Snipe was unfortunately not a jack. Another year maybe...

Butterflies

Small White A bumper year for most of the butterflies seen on the Reserve. There were twenty-four records for this species with a maximum of nine on 17th August, which was only one day out from the maximum count last year.

Large White A better year with ten records between June and September.

Green-veined White Nine records this year, mainly of single individuals.

Orange Tip Eleven records of which seven were in May. A maximum of six were seen on the 7th May.

Peacock Recorded twenty seven times from March until September.

Comma Six sightings, all of singles, except for two seen on 12th October.

Red Admiral A much better year, with fourteen records. Still only ones or twos being seen though.

Small Tortoiseshell The most prolific species again this year with thirty-three records from April onwards. There was even one noted as 'basking in the winter sunshine' on 14th December.

Meadow Brown Sixteen records this year, including a very respectable twenty-one seen on 13th July.

Wall Brown Ten records of either ones or twos, mainly in August.

Small Copper The only disappointment on this years list, with just a single specimen seen on 26th May.

Small Skipper Four records, including eight seen on 13th July.

Large Skipper Like last year, just three records, all of singles on the embankment.

Painted Lady A bit better for this migrant species with seven records from 10th May until 9th September.

Moths

A new actinic moth trap was brought down to the Reserve and was active for more nights than previous years, which resulted in a greater amount of moths, both in terms of numbers and species, being caught. Once the moths were identified, they were released unharmed to the area where they were captured. Some of the moths recorded this year were Barred Straw, Cinnabar (including lots of caterpillars throughout July), Common Swift, Common White Wave, Elephant Hawk-moth, Small Elephant Hawk-moth, Flame, Frosted Orange, Heart & Dart, Knot Grass, Large Yellow Underwing, Map-winged Swift, Mouse Moth, Purple Thorn, Rosy Rustic, Silver Y, Silver-ground Carpet, Small Magpie, Smoky Wainscot, Square-spot Rustic, The Gothic.

If anyone would like to bring down their own trap or arrange for a night-time session or two, please contact Tom Hubball on 01535 678334.

Dragonflies and Damselflies

Brown Hawker An incredible twenty-three records from 29th June (a week earlier than last year) until 5th October. Up to six were seen at any one time and a female was seen laying eggs in the pond on 16th July.

Common Darter Eleven records this year with one pair seen mating on 14th September and two pairs mating on 21st September.

Unidentified Hawker An unidentified hawk was seen on both 31st August and 4th September so Steve Warrillow of the British Dragonfly Society (and warden of Denso Marston Nature Reserve) was called in to try and identify it.

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Common Hawker Steve came down to the Reserve on 20th September and identified a Common Hawker carrying food. This is a 'first' for the Reserve, although the above unidentified dragonflies could have been this species, he couldn't possibly confirm it from the description given to him.

Southern Hawker As Steve was marvelling at the Common Hawker with its prey, another dragonfly came into view from behind the reed mace. He quickly identified this as a Southern Hawker and yet another 'first' for the Reserve. Amazingly, no other dragonflies were seen that day!

Common Blue Damselfly Six records this year with four males and two females seen on 15th June and a mating pair recorded on the 29th along with two more solitary males.

Blue-tailed Damselfly Only eleven records this year with a maximum of five males and three females seen on 15th June. However, there was a very late record of a single specimen on 7th September.

Azure Damselfly Once again there were very few records of this species although a pair was seen mating on 15th June.

Large Red Damselfly Six records this year from 17th May to 13th June with an incredible eleven males and two females seen on 8th June.

Banded Demoiselle After none last year, it was great to see this attractive damselfly back on the Reserve and ten males and three females seen on 8th June was the best sight of all.

At this point we would just like to say a big 'thank you' to Steve Warrillow, for taking the time to come and identify the Common and Southern Hawkers. Hopefully, in subsequent years, he and other members of the British Dragonfly Society (Yorkshire Branch) will conduct a thorough survey of the Odonata species on the Reserve.

Insects and Invertebrates

Leech These were recorded again this year, with one in the pond on 13th July and two Horse Leeches seen 'swimming' in the stream on 16th.

Swan Mussel There were lots again in the gravel, especially around the islands and by the beach.

Phyllobius pomaceus Two sightings this year of these green weevils on 15th May and 8th June.

Rhagonycha fulva Once again there were lots of these Soldier Beetles recorded from late June to early July.

Dytiscus marginalis A Great Diving Beetle larva was found in the stream on 17th May and another in the drainage hole on 25th June. Other diving beetles and larvae were also recorded.

Chrysopa perla Only two of these blue-green lacewings were recorded this year but this is probably due to them being overlooked rather than a crash in their population.

Nepa cinerea Four Water Scorpions were found on 3rd August while maintenance work was being carried out on the pond and stream.

Mammals

Field Vole The only records this year are of victims of successful hunting by Kestrels.

Bank Vole No sightings again this year.

Wood Mouse Two found in the hide on 20th April were quickly caught and put outside.

Mole The number of molehills are still increasing, indicating a booming population especially in the playing fields.

Rabbit Numbers have increased rapidly this year with a maximum of 29 being seen on 23rd August on the playing fields.

Common Shrew One found dead on the path on 20th July.

Squirrel After so many years of being squirrel free, one has definitely taken up residence on the Reserve this year and was frequently seen from November onwards. A drey in one of the sycamores in the main hedge was removed but the squirrel quickly relocated to the Kestrel box on the riverbank.

Weasel One seen hunting in the stonewall in front of the hide on 25th June.

Mink Only three sightings this year, however these sightings do not include three that were trapped and disposed of.

Fox Not recorded this year.

Pipistrelle Bat A disappointing year with only one recorded by the entrance to the hide on 31st March.

Roe Deer No sightings this year and, thankfully, no damage to trees either.

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Amphibians

Common Frog No change in status and although they were not noted as frequently in the logbook, there were definitely as many as in previous years.

Common Toad No change in status with a maximum of nine seen on 26th May.

Smooth Newt Three sightings this year with two seen in the stream on the 20th April, one on 7th May and a juvenile seen in the pond on 27th July, indicating that breeding had probably taken place on the Reserve.

Month by month summary by Shaun Radcliffe

Intro and other items by Tom Hubball