

FRIENDS OF RAWCLIFFE MEADOWS

Annual Report 2005



Giant Bellflower -The Copse – Rawcliffe Meadows

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INTRODUCTION

Rawcliffe Meadows Nature Park, established in 1991, covers 25 acres of the Clifton floodplain on the northern outskirts of York. The park is owned by the Environment Agency and leased to Sustrans the cycle track operator. The site is managed by Friends of Rawcliffe Meadows, a voluntary group belonging to the York Natural Environment Trust.

As well as providing access to open countryside for local people, Rawcliffe Meadows is managed as a traditional Ings flood meadow under the Countryside Stewardship scheme. This is the fifteenth Annual Report of Friends of Rawcliffe Meadows, summarising our work during the year 2005.

Website: <http://www.communicate.co.uk/york/form/index.phtml>

EVENTS

Work parties carried on throughout the year, with the regular small group of volunteers keeping the site up to scratch!

January 2005 brought with it the task of clearing the heaviest amount of flood debris we had ever seen, assistance with tidying up was provided by the EA and BTCV. Cap and Carole helped with keeping the birds fed throughout the winter...

February saw the start of SOS, our Save the Sparrows project aimed at encouraging Tree Sparrows into the copse and with the assistance of Steve Huddleston of Wheatear who had manufactured 37 bird boxes with metal hole plates, these were put into place along with two bat boxes and a little owl box. The BTCV pollarded and coppiced the willows in the pond area, the offcuts of which were fixed down at the back of the area to provide habitat.

June 16th was the date for the annual pond dip, which although great fun, was poorly attended despite publicity, similarly the annual meadow walk on July 14th.

August saw a lot of hard work being carried out putting ramps beneath the cattle grids to permit hedgehogs and small mammals to escape easily, some of the holes being quite deep. The hay cut worked well apart from the delay in getting a large number of bales offsite. This resulted in them being vandalised and some set fire to, another loss in income! Work was also carried out on trees in the scrub area, which were re-staked and cleared of encroaching weeds. The annual work of repairing vandal-created gaps in the fences was carried out, prior to grazing being able to start. Many members of the public forget that having the cattle on site is a key factor to the natural management of the site's plant life, along with being part of the Stewardship agreement with DEFRA, which provides our basic income.

In September we received a Yorkshire Wildlife Trust/npower Conservation Award for the many years work looking after the site – recognition and money is always welcome! The money will help towards starting the Grow More Tansy (GMT) project, as part of which we have gathered seed from plants on site to be grown on by Brunswick Organic Nursery, which can then be planted at other points on site to hopefully increase the Meadows and thus the national population of Tansy beetle. We also submitted our work to a scheme organised by Flora Locale but didn't receive an award, however this did get us on their web site, even if currently in Northumberland!

The autumn has seen volunteers clearing bulrush from the larger ponds in the reservoir basin, along with securing more of the woodpiles in the pond area. Unfortunately travellers' horses appeared on site from the hospital and with fencing work that has been done on the hospital side we were unable to easily get them off, so a lot of upheaval has been made to the damp flood banks but we will attempt to reseed in the spring!

ECOLOGICAL REPORT

Martin Hammond provides the following report:

Cornfield Nature Reserve (Martin Hammond)

At last the long-running problems with perennial weeds seem to be under control and very little herbicide was used on the Cornfield this year.

Two half-hectare plots of Wildlife Seed Crop established successfully despite the now annual depredations of pollen beetles. Fodder radish seems to dominate in these mixtures even when it is sown at a low rate; triticale (a hybrid cereal) also grew well but yet again quinoa seems to have yielded little fertile seed. Despite being a crop favoured by DEFRA, there is no point continuing to grow quinoa in this location. The mixture at the western end of the field also produced masses of self-sown redshank and fat hen, both useful seed sources for songbirds.

Two parcels of the wheat crop were left standing rather than being flailed down to stubble. By late autumn these had been battered by wind and rain, providing patchy open cover which was much favoured by buntings and Skylarks.

By November the re-sited seed crop at the eastern end of the field was attracting large numbers of sparrows, finches and buntings but there were also many birds in the cultivated strips which run through the centre of the field (mainly covered in seedheads of fat hen) and in the small plot of kale and teasel (and couch grass!) adjoining Shipton Road.

Wildlife reports (Martin Hammond)

Mammals

My own records are of the usual species: Weasel, Fox, a couple of sightings of Roe Deer in the Cornfield. Cap reports seeing a Weasel by the pond in November, though my own sightings tend to be at the northern end of the site. Good numbers of bats were feeding along the Ings Dyke in spring. It is quite possible that there are bat roosts in some of the big, cavitied trees on the dyke banks and this clearly needs investigating in case management work is needed. I did not see any Water Voles in 2005 – did anyone else?

Insects

We have two recent additions to the Meadows list of butterflies. Speckled Woods were frequent around hedges at the northern end of the site in late summer (also reported from the Copse in June). Not long ago this species was restricted to the magnesian limestone belt in Yorkshire; as its range expanded it established 'pioneer' populations at York Cemetery and Knavesmire Wood and has become widespread in the past couple of years.

Nigel Stewart has been spotting Purple Hairstreaks during the past few years in the mature hedgerow oaks

Birds

This year there were so many bird records that it makes sense to provide a systematic list. This covers not only Rawcliffe Meadows and the Cornfield Nature Reserve but also neighbouring areas (Clifton Ings, Clifton Park, Rawcliffe Bar Country Park, Rawcliffe Ings and the River Ouse). Many valuable records have kindly been provided by Nigel Stewart (NS) and Cap Fowles (CF). Anyone with interesting sightings is invited to e-mail me (m.r.hammond@virgin.net) so that I can include them in future reports.

Little Grebe

Two birds on the river Ouse by Rawcliffe Ings from 5th to 13th January with single sightings there on 14th February, 15th April, 27th October and 5th December (NS).

Cormorant

A single bird of the continental race *sinensis* seen flying up river at Clifton Ings on 4th February and a single bird seen perched in a dead tree by the river at Rawcliffe Ings regularly throughout late June and early July and again on 18th and 19th August (NS).

Mute Swan

A pair on the river at Clifton from 9th to 15th September then seen occasionally until 11th December at least (NS).

Wigeon

A drake on the river at Clifton Ings on 14th January. (NS).

Common Teal

At Clifton Ings two birds were on the floods on 13th January with eight there the next day, 25 were seen flying up river on the 21st and another 20 were attracted to the large pools caused by melting snow on 26th February (NS).

Pochard

A drake on the river at Rawcliffe Ings on 9th January and another there from 22nd November to 21st December (NS).

Goldeneye

A female on the river at Clifton Ings on 15th February. (NS).

Goosander

A pair on the river at Clifton/Rawcliffe Ings on 24th February and a male on 22nd-24th March plus an unseasonal four birds there on 7th June (NS).

Peregrine

An immature bird over Clifton Park on 21st January (NS).

Sparrowhawk

Cap comments that sightings seem to be increasing, perhaps reflecting the good populations of songbirds around the site. At least two different birds habitually hunted the Cornfield later in the year with quite a number of Wood or Feral Pigeons taken.

Grey Partridge

A single bird in a field adjacent to the northern end of Rawcliffe Ings on 16th April (NS).

Pheasant

At least one brood reared in the Cornfield, where Pheasants are now regular throughout the year. Five males were perched together on top of a gate on New Year's Eve.

Snipe

Wintered on Clifton Ings with maximum counts of 30 on 26th February and 40 from late November to the year end (NS). Numbers in the flood reservoir at either end of the year were almost always in single figures, the best count being 12 on Boxing Day (MH).

Common Sandpiper

A single on the river bank at Rawcliffe Ings on 23rd June and again on 13th July with two there on 9th September (NS).

Common Tern

One flew up river at Rawcliffe Ings on 29th June (NS).

Barn Owl

One was flushed from a large ash tree beside the Ings Dyke, just north of the Rawcliffe Meadows boundary, in early October (MH).

Green Woodpecker

The wintering bird from last year was seen regularly up to 11th March then possibly the same bird seen again on 6th June and 23rd August (NS).

Skylark

Four pairs probably bred on the Cornfield NR (MH). Towards the end of the year, numbers on the Cornfield varied from a handful to 20+, with 52 there during the cold spell on 29th December (NS).

Grey Wagtail

Up to five wintering in the Clifton/Rawcliffe Ings area early in the year with two remaining through the summer at the sewage works. Seven birds were present early October with one or two seen regularly up to end of year (NS).

Waxwing

32 in the trees on the south side of the Allotments on 19th April with 26 on Rawcliffe Meadows on 23rd (NS). These are the second and third records for the Clifton Washland.

Redstart

A juvenile at Clifton Park on 22nd July (NS): an early migrant or had Redstart bred locally? A new species for the locality.

Whinchat

A party of five on Clifton Ings on 9th September (NS).

Wheatear

Two at the Cornfield N.R. on 27th April with another there on 7th May, all female types (NS).

Sedge Warbler

A juvenile in the Flood Reservoir on 16th August (NS). This was the only record, and presumably refers to a passage bird.

Reed Warbler

A bird sub -singing in the reeds at the small pond on Rawcliffe Bar Country Park on 26th July (NS). A new bird for the Clifton Washland area.

Whitethroat

Cap reported a reduction in numbers compared with previous years.

Lesser Whitethroat

A bird at Rawcliffe Ings on 11th May was then seen and heard over the next couple of months and possibly bred (NS).

Garden Warbler

A single bird in a hedge by the Cornfield N.R. on 13th-21st May, two in Clifton Park on 22nd July and 21st August with one there on 3rd September (NS).

Blackcap

Noted in the scrub patch by Blue Beck from 12th April; present there and around the pond throughout May and June (CF). Two males by the Cornfield N.R. on 5th December (NS) represents the first wintering record for the site.

Chiffchaff

Several records of arriving birds from 28th March onwards (CF).

Willow Warbler

First noted at the edge of the Country Park on 11th April, then seen or heard throughout spring and summer (CF).

Spotted Flycatcher

Two by the Pond on Rawcliffe Meadows on 19th May then the usual Autumn sightings in Clifton Park with birds present on 7th, 15th & 19th August and 9th & 12th September (NS). It is unclear whether this increasingly scarce summer migrant still breeds in the vicinity.

Jay

One in the Clifton/Rawcliffe Ings area on 23rd September with three there on the 28th and at least two remaining to the year end (NS).

Bullfinch

A group of 4 birds noted on 6th January (CF) and a party of 6 in late December (MH). A female was with four juveniles near the pond on 20th September (CF).

Linnet

A large flock built up once again in the later months, feeding on seed crops, stubbles and cultivated strips on the Cornfield NR. 200+ were estimated in early December with probably 250 towards the year end.

Siskin

A flock of 16 near the Cornfield N.R. on 23rd October (NS).

Lesser Redpoll

Ten in the Rawcliffe Bar Country Park on 21st December (NS).

Tree Sparrow

Present throughout the year, mainly around the Copse and Cornfield NR but also in the hedge along the Ings Dyke and around Clifton Park. By October, good numbers were gathering to feed on seeds in the Cornfield: birds used both the fodder radish-dominated crop mixtures and cultivated strips with abundant fat hen. On 21st November, mixed flocks of Linnet and Tree Sparrow numbered well over 100. Although no precise estimate is available, the wintering population was certainly several dozen.

Tree Sparrows were present continuously at feeding hoppers in the pond and Blue Beck scrub areas during the winter months (CF).

Yellowhammer

Birds were at the feeding hopper in the Blue Beck scrub on several dates during February and March (CF). During November and December unprecedented numbers of Yellowhammers were present on and around the Cornfield NR. Around 15 were present on 21st November, building to 60+ on Boxing Day (MH).

Reed Bunting

Throughout January and February, 50+ were observed going to roost at a small pond in Clifton Park that has become choked by Reedmace (NS). In October to December exceptional numbers of Reed Bunting were present on the Cornfield NR with birds also present in the flood reservoir. Reed Buntings tend to feed amongst dense cover so it is very difficult to estimate the wintering population but it was probably in the region of 50-100 birds. Reed Buntings feed mainly amongst fodder radish-dominated seed crops but also on cultivated strips with abundant fat hen.

Reed Buntings were present continuously at feeding hoppers in the pond and Blue Beck scrub areas during the winter months (CF).

Corn Bunting

Corn Buntings were very irregular during the early months. 51 came in to roost in trees bordering Rawcliffe Meadows on 1st March with 30 there on 7th -8th and another six on 1st May (NS). There were no summer records. Two birds were at the Cornfield N.R. on 15th November (NS) with numbers increasing steadily to end of the year. Pre-roost congregations numbered at least 74 birds on Boxing Day but there were certainly more around the site (MH). This represents a welcome return to form for the Clifton Washland as a traditional wintering habitat for this seriously declining songbird.

Nest Box records

Steve Huddleston of the Huddleston & Jackson Bird Ringing Partnership (<http://www.hjrg.org.uk/>) checked the nest boxes in the Copse area on 20th May. 21 out of 50 boxes were in use but 11 of these contained only partly-built or recently-started nests (possibly Tree Sparrows making late breeding attempts). 17 young Blue Tits were rung from two broods whilst 20 young Great Tits were rung from three boxes. One Tree Sparrow pair had successfully fledged young.

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CONTACT

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