

Wheatears breeding on Weybourne Camp

Wheatears have not been proved to breed in coastal Norfolk for over 20 years. However, 'scaly' juveniles have been recorded in July at several coastal locations in recent times, while an adult and two juveniles at Happisburgh in late July 2012, was strongly suggestive of local breeding. Apart from this record, juvenile Wheatears in July are thought to be early migrants from further north, although there are no ringing recoveries to support this suggestion.

In 2015, a local birder saw a pair of adult Wheatears entering what was presumed to be a nest hole in a rabbit burrow in the north-east corner of Weybourne Camp on June 12th, although unfortunately he was unable to check the actual nest site. Subsequently, he saw 2-3 fledged juveniles in the same area in July, as well as an adult male in heavy moult.

In 2016, I found an adult male Wheatear, again in the north-east corner of the camp on June 29th (the first since late May), and was delighted to see that it was accompanied by a recently-fledged 'scaly' juvenile on July 12th, with two juveniles present on 14th and five by the next day. The plumages of the juveniles were all at the same stage of development and from their behaviour it was apparent that they were all from the same brood. The adult male showed very little interest in them and in fact was seen to chase them off on more than one occasion. By July 17th, the male had lost its tail feathers probably as a result of a failed attack by one of the local Sparrowhawks, and thereafter he underwent a complete moult. On only one occasion (July 20th) was an adult female seen. I subsequently learnt that on June 30th a singing male had been seen on the western border of Weybourne Camp near some of the old wartime buildings. Presumably the nest was somewhere in this area and on fledging, the young had clearly been taken by the male to the more suitable feeding area, several hundred yards to the east, in the north-eastern corner of the camp, where the constant attention of rabbits produces an ideal short sward.

Four of the juveniles remained in the same general area for the next eight days until July 20th, after which they dispersed with the last one being seen on August 5th. Of interest single juveniles were recorded on Blakeney Point on July 11th and 22nd. While the first one could not have been from the Weybourne nest, the second one may well have been.

Unfortunately, the OS grid line that divides TG04 (the Cley 10km square) from TG14 (the Weybourne/Sheringham square) follows the eastern fence line of the old radar station and thus Weybourne Camp falls in both 10km squares. While the nest site used in 2015 was in TG14, that in 2016 was just within the Cley Bird Club square, even though the young spent the immediate post-fledging period in the North East Norfolk Bird Club area!

Lowland Wheatears nest chiefly in old rabbit burrows and frequent closely-grazed grassy areas, thus parts of Weybourne Camp are ideal. Breeding site fidelity is apparently very high for established breeders and so it may well be that the camp could become a regular breeding locality for this declining species.

Moss Taylor