

Norfolk Wildlife Trust Cley & Salthouse Marshes

Breeding report 2020

George Baldock – Reserve Warden



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Introduction

This year has been interesting to say the least. In March, the breeding season was fast approaching but so too was the inevitability of the country being restricted to their homes, as Covid-19 spread across the country.

On March 18th, the reserve closed to the public, including the hides and visitor centre. On March 23rd people were told to stay at home. Initially, this included all reserve staff. The reserve footpaths and surrounding roads became very quiet but the wildlife carried on as usual. There was a feeling of hope that breeding birds would be able to take advantage of the reduced footfall.

As people weren't allowed to travel, the usual volunteer group who spend a lot of time monitoring breeding birds on the reserve were not able to do so. After the first 2 weeks, I was allowed to return to work and my main priority was to carry out monitoring of key species of breeding bird on the reserve. From 11th May, some volunteers were able to return to assist with some monitoring, including WeBS counts.

This year's surveying was not as extensive as previous years, due to reduced resources, so key species were prioritised. The results of this monitoring are in the below report.

The monitoring area covered was between West bank at Cley, through to Iron Road at Salthouse. Some data was recorded beyond this and will be noted separately in the report.

Highlights for this year include Lapwing, Marsh Harrier, Cettis Warbler, Bearded Tit and for a second year, a booming Bittern.

Weather

As always, the weather can dictate the success of the breeding season. From the end of March, there was a prolonged period of warm, sunny days. Standing water on the grazing marshes, used by nesting waders, started drying out quickly and water levels started to drop. Initially these levels were maintained via a series of water controls, so the marshes were able to be kept wet throughout the breeding season, providing feeding habitat for chicks. Later in the season, it became more difficult to maintain water in foot-drains and other in-field features, some of which completely dried out.

Species Summaries

Little Grebe

Pairs: 2

Fledged: 5

Two pairs nested this year, the first on Don's Pool, which hatched 3 young, with 2 going on to fully fledge. The second pair nested on Snipe's Marsh, which hatched 5 young and likely fledged 3.

Bittern

Territories: 1

Fledged: 0

For the second year a Bittern was heard booming at Cley. It was first heard on April 8th, but after a few weeks, seemed to re-locate to Blakeney Freshes, where booming continued, success of this bird is unknown.

Grey Heron

Nests: 5

Fledged: Min 4

Little Egret

Nests: 4?

Fledged: ?

Grey Herons and Little Egrets, once again nested in North Foreland woods, South of the A149, adjacent to Snipes Marsh. This woodland is owned by the Blount family but monitoring of the heronry is carried out and the results are included here.

The monitoring of the heronry is always difficult due to reduced visibility, with no way of getting a good vantage point to get accurate numbers. A fairly good estimate of breeding pairs can be made when flushed off the nests and estimate of juveniles can be made from sightings around the reserve after fledging.

On the 4th August 21 Little Egrets were reported on Snipe's marsh with 'several juveniles'.

Marsh Harrier

Nests: 4

Fledged: 3

After 'Blondie' going missing in 2019, she didn't return this year. This allowed new birds to breed on site, which was interesting to see where they nested and how successful they were.

As in recent years, a nest was being utilised within the 'Pope's' reed bed, where 1 young successfully fledged. At Cley, there were 3 other nests that were being used throughout the season. 1 nest was located near West Bank but after a few weeks any activity around the nest ceased. Another nest was located within the boardwalk reed bed, this nest was successful, fledging 1 young. A late nest was then made near the main scrapes, which also fledged 1 young.

WaterRail

Pairs: Min 4

Fledged: Min 2

4 Territories were noted on the reserve. The locations were on Pat's Pool by Bishops Hide, behind the main hides, Snipe's Marsh and at the north east corner of the reed bed, by east bank.

A minimum of 2 young were seen and were near fledging.

Oystercatcher

Pairs: 8

Fledged: 1

The number of pairs using the reserve is down this year. Most nests successfully hatched, but only one fledged young was seen, which had been kept well hidden within long vegetation on Watling Water. 1 pair nested on the north side of the shingle beach, but succumbed to high tides.

Avocet

Pairs: 43

Fledged: 3

The start of the season was no different to other years, where the majority of avocets nested as a colony on the main scrapes, mostly on Whitwell and Simmonds scrapes.

On 24th May, when most of the nests were due to hatch, 3 Common Cranes landed near the colony and throughout the day, were seen taking eggs from the nests.

The following day, only 1 nest out of 34 was still active, this nest was soon abandoned.

Most avocets then, as usual, nested individually around the reserve, with better hatching success.

3 broods were also seen, being walked onto the reserve by their parents from Blakeney Point.

Unfortunately most chicks succumbed to predation, with only 3 fledged young seen.

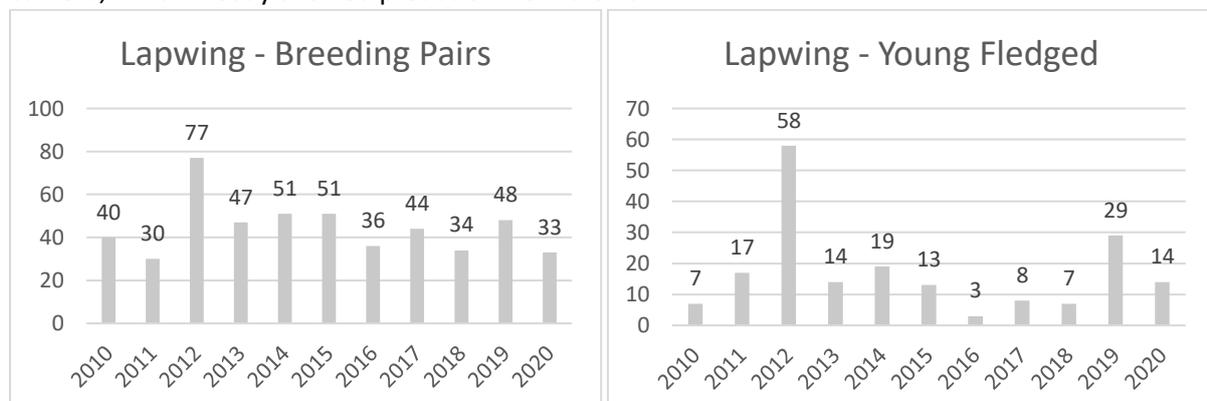
Lapwing

Pairs: 33

Fledged: 14

An average year, after a bumper year in 2019. Unlike previous years, most fledged young were from first attempts. The majority of nests and fledglings came from areas of the reserve that have recently had water level improvements (Bull Marsh, Serpentine, Popes Marsh). These areas are now wetter during the winter and the levels can be managed better throughout the breeding season. One pair had nested in the field behind the visitor centre.

Decoy nests were placed on areas of the reserve to monitor predation, using a motion sensor camera, which mostly showed predation from crows.



Ringed Plover

Pairs: 7

Fledged: 16

A Report on the Ringed Plover breeding season was produced by David and Pat Wileman. The conclusion is below. This data incorporates records taken from Cley to Kelling and includes pairs and success from NT owned land around Gramborough Hill, so may be duplicated in their reports.

All territories were yet again on the shingle areas. There were again no pairs on the meadows or freshwater scrapes. The three nests located were behind the fence lines. 7 pairs produced 5 broods of chicks with one pair probably producing two of the broods. 17 chicks were seen 2 at Cley, 4 at Pope's Marsh and 11 at Salthouse. It is thought that all but one of these chicks fledged successfully.

Year	Pairs	Nests found	Broods seen	Chicks seen	Chicks fledged
2012	4	1	2	5	5
2013	7	7	3	9	2
2014	6	3	1	2	1
2015	6	4	3	12	0
2016	6	6	4	10	7
2017	9	8	4	11	5+*
2018	6	8	3	8	4
2019	7	3	6	19	13
2020	7	3	5	17	16

Little Ringed Plover

Pairs: 4

Fledged: Min 5

This year, 2 pairs utilised the fields behind the visitor centre. Adults were regularly seen flying to and from the reserve. The pair on the West field hatched 4 young and were seen at the bottom of Old Woman's Lane but assuming the young had been lost, the pair had re-laid in the same field this new brood of 3 was seen in the car park on 22 July, with the adult attempting to usher them through. Another pair had a nest on the Serpentine, successfully fledging young and a fourth in the vicinity of Whitwell Scrape.

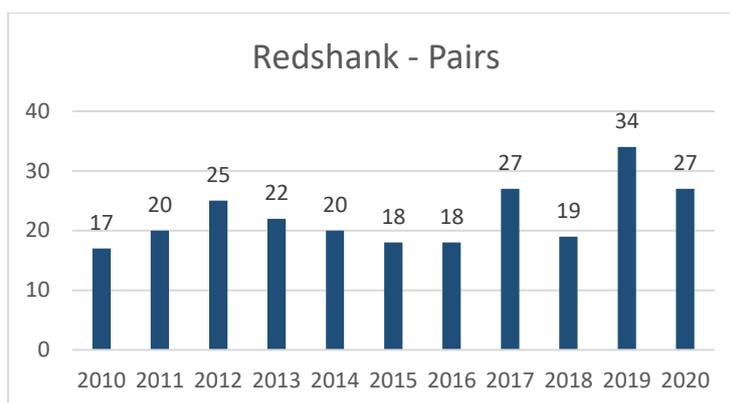
On 23rd July, 3 fledged young were seen on Pat's Pool and 2 more on Whitwell Scrape.

Redshank

Pairs: 27

Fledged: minimum 8

Redshank pairs were recorded when surveying the grazing marshes, watching breeding behaviour and nests located by monitoring adults changing over to share incubation. The highest concentration of Redshank were recorded on the Bull Marsh, the Serpentine and on the marshes south of Babcock hide. One pair had nested in a small tuft of grass on the shingle beach, near the beach car park. This was fenced off to avoid disturbance or trampling however it is assumed that the eggs were later predated.

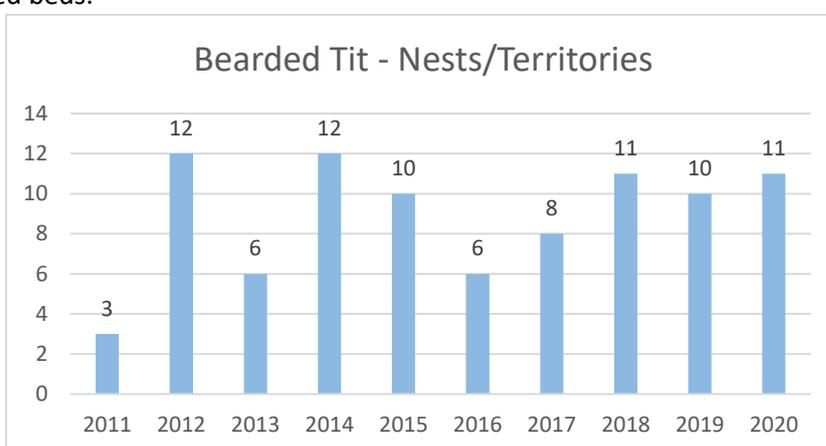


Bearded Tit

Territories: 11

Fledged: min 25

Another successful year for Bearded Tits. Some nests having early success, with adults feeding fledged young as early as 23rd April, along East Bank. Other territories were spread evenly across the Cley and Pope's reed beds.



Cettis Warbler

Territories: 6

Fledged: min 4 (under recorded)

A good year for Cettis Warbler territories, with 6 recorded across the reserve. 3 singing males were located between Cley village and East Bank, 1 along the edge of East Bank and 2 more between East Bank and Iron Road.

On August 2nd, a brood of 4 newly fledged young were seen on the skirts path.

Sedge Warbler

Territories: 35

Fledged: min 17 (under recorded)

Reed Warbler

Territories: 21

Fledged: min 4 (under recorded)

Sedge Warbler and Reed Warbler territories were recorded using the same transects as in previous years, through the reed bed at Cley and also along the edge of the reed bed on Pope's, including the skirts path from Cley village and along East bank. The territories recorded are the maximum count of singing males from 3 transects throughout the season. Unfortunately, due to limited resources, no further transects were carried out to determine success of fledged birds, but data was recorded whilst carrying out other work and from volunteers later in the season from public footpaths.

The densest population of both species occurs along the Catchwater drain, with others situated along the ditch system throughout the reed bed and several along the boardwalk reed bed and on the edges of the reed bed on Pope's Marsh.

Grasshopper Warbler

Territories: 3 Fledged: 0

3 singing males were heard at the end of April, 1 in front of the visitor centre, 1 by east bank car park and another in the area of Bittern Pool. With several surveying attempts, no signs of breeding success were seen.

Reed Bunting

Territories: 8 Fledged: Min 4

Calling males and feeding flights were recorded from viewpoints on the edge of the reed beds and also on the reed bed transect. Most territories were within the reed beds, with 2 utilising reed filled ditches within the grazing marsh. Fledged young were recorded on East Bank and on Pope's, but were under recorded.

Stonechat

Nests: 1 Fledged: Unknown

A pair were seen carrying food into a patch of scrub on the saltmarsh, near West Bank, indicating young had hatched, however no young were seen.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to various local birdwatchers, who helped with data recording, whilst on their permitted local walk during lockdown, including Mark Golley, Mike Harcup, Steve Gantlett and later, after restrictions lifted to David and Pat Wileman, Kath and Mick Claydon, Peter and Sue Morrison, David Griffiths Gordon Follows, Graham Fellows, Colin Blaxhill, Steve Hale.