

# Grimsargh Wetlands Newsletter



## Summer 2024

### Welcome

Welcome to your latest newsletter. After what has been, even by the standards of Preston, a very wet and dreary winter and early spring, it is good to now have some drier and brighter days, as we head into the summer months. Of course, many believe the prolonged wet weather is just a sign of things to come as climate change brings us a warmer, wetter world.

Changing climate is already having an impact on our wildlife as highlighted by the recent *Wetlands Bird Survey* report that reveals the impact of milder winters across Europe on our over-wintering populations of waterbirds. Read more about this important document in this newsletter.

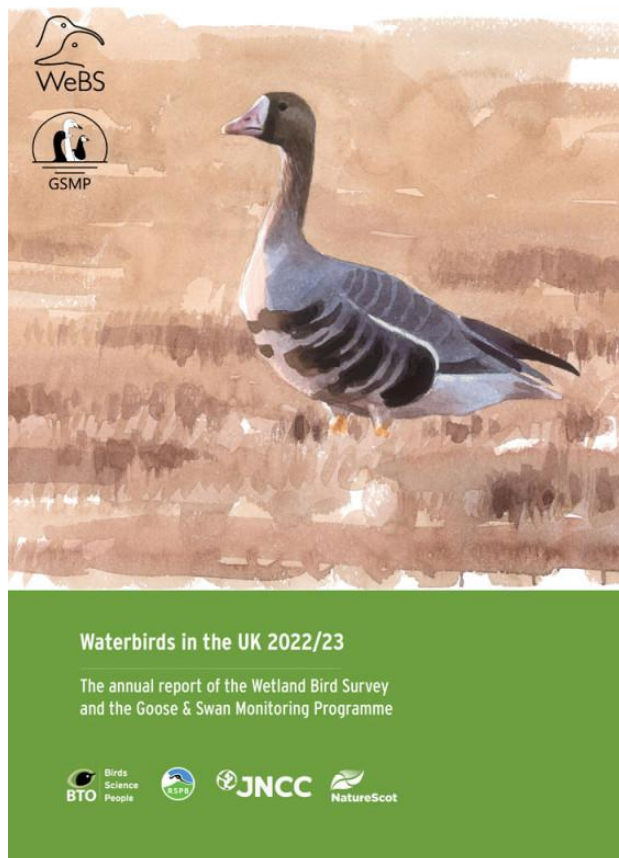
It's not just birdlife that is increasingly being affected by climate change and loss of habitat. *Butterfly Conservation* has recently issued a stark warning regarding the state of the UK's butterfly population. Essentially, ours may well be the last generation to enjoy butterflies and moths in any abundance (<https://butterfly-conservation.org/last-generation>).

The message is very much '*catch it while you can*' and the Wetlands is an ideal place to interact with nature. Irrespective of whether you visit on your own, or join us at one of our organised events, such as our *Summer Bug Hunt*, we hope you make the most of the Wetlands during the warm summer months.

Finally, be sure to visit our stall at one of the summer's local community events.

The Trustees

### The Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS)



The latest *Waterbirds in the UK* report is now available for download ([https://www.bto.org/sites/default/files/publications/waterbirds\\_in\\_the\\_uk\\_webs\\_gsmp\\_202223.pdf](https://www.bto.org/sites/default/files/publications/waterbirds_in_the_uk_webs_gsmp_202223.pdf)).

The Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) monitors non-breeding waterbirds across the UK (<https://www.facebook.com/WetlandBirdSurvey>). Wetland sites are surveyed by over 3000 volunteers on a specified day each month, thereby providing data about populations and changes in abundance and distribution. In the case of Grimsargh Wetlands, it is trustee Geoff Carefoot who undertakes the WeBS count each month. For the purposes of the survey, the term

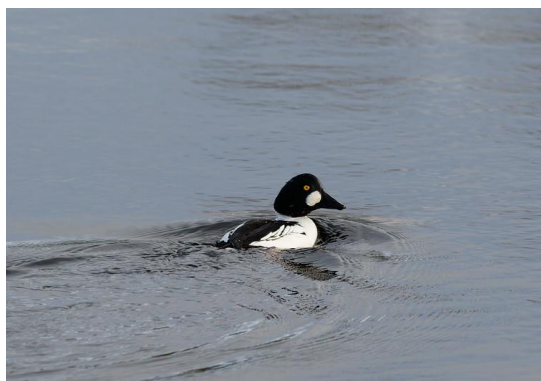
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'waterbird' includes wildfowl (ducks, geese and swans), waders, rails, divers, grebes, cormorants and herons. Gulls and terns may be optionally included. In addition to native species, non-native, feral and vagrant species are also included in the counts.

The results of the latest (2022/23) WeBS make for interesting reading, with the impact of climate change and habitat degradation and loss having increasingly profound effects on waterbird populations during the winter months. In essence, fewer ducks, geese, swans and waders are travelling to the UK as milder winter conditions keep them in northern Europe. Historically, harsh winters at breeding grounds in places like Greenland, Iceland and arctic Russia would result in large numbers of wetland birds migrating to the UK.

The birds that do come to the UK for winter are now here for shorter periods, arriving later and leaving earlier. This is particularly noticeable in, for example, the case of Bewick's Swans which have declined by 96% in the last 25 years, along with Goldeneye where numbers have halved over the same time period.



The Goldeneye – a winter visitor at Grimsargh Wetlands.

The survey also revealed that some birds which would, in the past, have left the UK in autumn are now staying with us for the whole winter. For example, there has been an increase in Black-tailed Godwits over-wintering in the UK, rather than migrating to southern Europe.

The survey also provides important information about the impact of avian influenza on waterbird populations. For example, Barnacle Geese from Svalbard and Greenland spend the winter months in the UK and were significantly affected by the outbreak of avian influenza that began in late 2021. Although the latest survey results show signs of recovery in the Svalbard population, there is, as yet, no sign of recovery in the Greenland population.

All these examples show the importance of the volunteer-led, WeBS project and the importance of recording observations in order to better understand the impact of our changing world on bird migratory behaviour.

### *Wetlands Spring Curlew Roost*

Curlew are one of our most threatened waders, with the ongoing decline in the UK breeding population resulting in the species being 'Red-listed' on the UK Conservation Status Report – indicative of the highest conservation priority. This is an issue of international significance, given that a significant proportion of western Europe's Curlew population overwinters in the UK. Curlew typically spend the winter on our coasts and estuaries where they feed on tidal mudflats, marshes and surrounding farmland (locally, the Ribble and Lune estuaries are internationally recognised winter haunts of Curlew and other waders). During the spring, the UK breeding population moves inland to summer breeding grounds on the heather moorlands (locally, the Bowland Fells). It is this spring migration, between the coast and the fells, that makes Grimsargh Wetlands an ideal 'stop-over' point for birds to rest and roost as they move inland. The roost is transient and it is only during early March that very large numbers of roosting birds are recorded. This year, the roost reached its peak around the second week of March with over 400 birds reported roosting here on the night of 11<sup>th</sup> March (record submitted to the East Lancashire Ornithologists Club recording site by Grimsargh resident, Mark Breaks). These numbers soon fell as the flights inland declined;

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however, it is abundantly clear that the Wetlands is a significant spring site both locally and, indeed, nationally for Curlew.

Of course, just as numbers of Curlew roosting on the Wetlands were diminishing, the numbers of the rather similar looking Whimbrel began to increase. We are fortunate that the Wetlands is one of the key 'stop-over' sites in Lancashire for late-spring migrating Whimbrel moving across the UK to breeding grounds often in Iceland or Scandinavia. As usual, county-wide counts of Whimbrel were undertaken by volunteers in late April/early May when the migration peaks. This year, 140 were recorded on the Wetlands on 24<sup>th</sup> April and 147 were recorded at the count on 2<sup>nd</sup> May. These numbers, once again, emphasise the local significance of the Wetlands as a 'stop-over' site for this migratory wader.

### *Mediterranean Gulls*



*At least one Mediterranean Gull amongst a flock of Black-headed Gulls on the Island lake.*

Black-headed Gulls are often seen, in large numbers, around the Wetlands. However, a meticulous search through the gulls will, in spring, often reveal the presence of maybe one or two Mediterranean Gulls. They are distinguished from the more numerous Black-headed Gulls by their slightly larger size, white wing-tips and, in breeding season, a full, black head (in contrast, the Black-headed Gull actually has a dark chocolate brown head, when in full breeding plumage). In addition, the bill and legs of the Mediterranean Gull are red and

the eyes are red-brown with a distinctive white crescent. Historically, the Mediterranean Gull was a rare bird in the UK; however, since the 1960s, numbers have gradually been increasing.

Last year, we considered ourselves very lucky to record up to 16 Mediterranean Gulls on the Wetlands during spring. Incredibly, this year, the number more than doubled (37 reported to East Lancashire Ornithologists Club recording site on 24<sup>th</sup> March). Going into April, these numbers declined as the gulls (both Black-headed and Mediterranean) largely left the Wetlands, presumably for their traditional nesting sites on the large island of Belmont Reservoir near Bolton. These records are particularly heartening in light of the recent outbreak of avian influenza that caused so much damage to gull and other seabird populations.

### *Ringed Gulls*

One of the Mediterranean Gulls visiting the Wetlands in early March was ringed – a colour ring (encoded 2XA6 yellow) on the right leg along with a metal ring on the left leg. Our colleagues at WWT Martin Mere were able to provide a detailed history of the bird.

The 'first winter' bird was ringed in November 2011 at Sandycove, Dublin making it over 13 years old. The bird was subsequently seen on numerous occasions in and around Sandycove; however, in March 2017 it was recorded, for the first time, at Brockholes Nature Reserve, Preston. After that, it was seen again, on numerous occasions, around Dublin before being recorded at Belmont Reservoir in March 2019. It then appeared to return to Ireland before again being regularly recorded at Brockholes in spring 2020, 21 and 22 and then, most recently, at Grimsargh in spring 2024.

A ringed (white ring with black code: JML9) Black-headed gull was also recorded on the Wetlands in March. Again, our colleagues at WWT Martin Mere were able to provide a detailed history of the bird – which proved to be

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quite different from that of the ringed Mediterranean Gull (above).



Black-headed Gull JML9 at Grimsargh Wetlands (photograph by Louise Greenwood).

In this case, the gull was ringed in Vollen, Asker, Norway in April 2020. It was recorded around Norway on several occasions between 2020 and 2023 before being seen at Grimsargh in March this year – the first sighting of this bird outside Norway.

These two examples show just how important ringing programmes are for improving our understanding of bird ecology. If you do see a ringed bird on the Wetlands, and can get even a partial read of the ring number/colour, then please do let us know. As you can see from the above examples, it is often possible to provide a wealth of invaluable information about the life-history of individual birds.

As in the case of the Black-headed Gull, described above, ringed birds may well carry a metal ring and/or colour ring(s). Often the metal ring is only readable following recovery/trapping; however, the colour rings are designed to be read ‘in the field’ without the need for trapping. Indeed, many more sightings of colour ringed birds are generated each year than for those with only a metal ring. Waders and gulls are particularly suited to colour ringing; their habitat means that their legs are usually easy to see. The coloured rings are often referred to as ‘Darvics’. The name comes from the Darvic PVC sheeting used to make the

rings. These were considered virtually indestructible; however, long exposure to air, sunlight and saltwater can result to them becoming brittle or fading (as noted in the case of the ringed Mediterranean gull).

### *Cetti's Warbler on the Wetlands*



Cetti's Warbler at Grimsargh Wetlands (photograph by Mark Breaks).

The spring also saw what we believe to be a notable first, for the Wetlands, with the sighting of a Cetti's Warbler. These small birds can prove somewhat elusive, often being heard (they have a very distinctive call) rather than seen, as they hide in reed beds and scrub. It is perhaps surprising that this species has not previously been recorded on the Wetlands, which has some ideal habitat for this warbler. If you are visiting the Wetlands, the public footpath provides a wonderful opportunity to listen out for this and other warblers in the reed beds of the Fen and the scrub between the footpath and the surrounding fields.

### *Spring Wildflower Walk*

On Saturday 30th March, we held our traditional wildflower walk. In glorious spring weather, over 20 members of the public took part in a guided walk around the Wetlands. After a brief introductory talk on the history of the site, visitors were able to take time at the main viewing screens to admire the Mediterranean Gulls amongst the large number of Black-headed gulls on the islands of the

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Island lake. Visitors were then led around the site by trustees and volunteers.



Visitors assembled for the Spring Wild Flower Walk.



Yellow Brain fungus. Also known as 'Witches' Butter' – reflecting the legend, that if the fungus appeared on the gate or door of a house, it meant that a witch had cast a spell on the family living there (photograph by Jayne Woollam).

We were fortunate that Primroses, Lesser Celandine, Coltsfoot, Cowslips and other early wildflowers were showing well. The display of Wood Anemones was particularly impressive and numerous ferns were emerging in the shaded areas of the embankments of the Mere. As is often the case, we were a little early to see the Early Purple Orchids at their best; nonetheless, there was plenty of evidence of orchids emerging. Given the wet weather of winter and early spring, it was not surprising that plenty of fungi were in evidence with a variety of jelly fungi and bracket fungi being seen together with the very distinctive King

Alfred Cake fungi and some, a little past their best, Elf Cup fungi. Throughout the walk, Chiffchaffs kept up their singing in the spring sunshine - although they often proved more difficult to view!



One of the many Hart's Tongue ferns seen around the embankments of the Mere (photograph by Jayne Woollam).

With the, often unpredictable, spring weather behaving, the walk was enjoyed by all and, at its conclusion, we were immensely grateful to receive donations to a total of £84.

### *New Tern Raft*

Throughout the winter and spring, our volunteers have been hard at work. In addition to regular maintenance activities, we have been working on the construction and deployment of a new tern raft. Terns are perhaps the most elegant and graceful of seabirds and you will, perhaps, remember that we first installed a group of tern rafts (created from empty cable drums) on the Mere in 2021. Rafts are a useful way of providing island habitat in areas of relatively deep water. As such, they can improve the breeding success of birds by providing areas safe from terrestrial predators. Following their installation, the cable drum rafts were almost immediately used by visiting Common Tern that nested and successfully fledged chicks. In subsequent years, the terns have faced considerable competition from gulls

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that have also shown a liking for the nesting trays on the rafts - leaving the terns with little opportunity for nesting.



Volunteers assemble the new tern raft.

The 'second generation' raft that we have now placed on the Mere is rather different in that, instead of holding a number of nesting trays, the much larger platform is covered with beach pebbles that should provide an ideal 'home from home' for terns that naturally nest on shingle beaches. In addition, the larger size of the platform should make it much more stable to wind and wave action.



Volunteers fill the new raft platform with beach pebbles.

The raft was constructed, over the winter months, by trustee, Geoff Carefoot and was deployed by a team of our volunteers during the late spring volunteer days – in time for the return of terns in late April or early May. Although the Wetlands is inland of the coast, it is very close to the Ribble – where Common Tern are known to feed all the way up to Ribchester and beyond. Equally, the nearby

Lancaster Canal is a very productive waterway for feeding terns. So, we have every expectation that, sooner or later, Common Tern will again be seen on the Wetlands and the new raft should make an ideal nesting site for them.



The new tern raft in place on the Mere.

### *The Fen Viewing Area*

An area of the Wetlands that has received little attention over the last couple of years is the Fen Access point and viewing screens. With all the building work being undertaken in the area adjacent to that viewing screen, it has not been a particularly wildlife-friendly area in recent times. That building work is now finished and a new secure boundary fence has been installed between the Wetlands and the housing development. The opportunity was therefore taken, at the last of the spring work sessions, to do some work in the viewing area. As elsewhere on the Fen, invasive willow had much diminished the clearing in front of the viewing screens. Volunteers, led by trustee Lesley Walker, cleared this willow and opened up the area again, giving better views deeper into the Fen and allowing more sunlight into the area around the small wildlife pond, thereby making it more attractive to aquatic invertebrates. The willow was used to create a pair of wildlife refuges, easily seen from the viewing screens. Hopefully, the now much quieter corner of the Fen should prove more attractive to wildlife and we would encourage you all to spend some time at the screens when you visit the Wetlands.

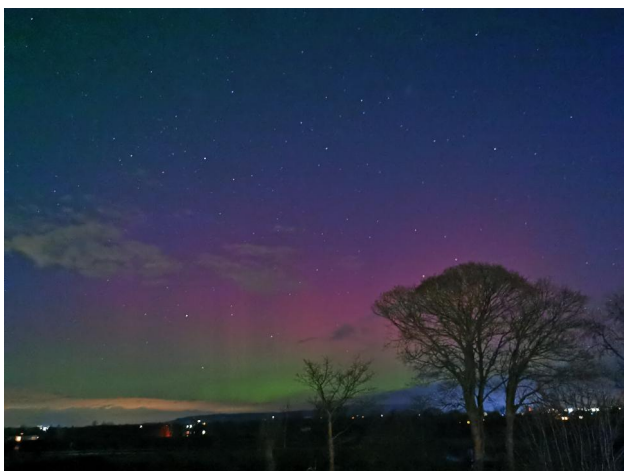
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Construction of one of the new Fen viewing area refuges in progress (photograph by Lesley Walker).

### *The Northern Lights*

On an evening in early March, conditions were just right for viewing the aurora borealis or Northern Lights across the UK. Usually, the phenomenon, caused by charged particles streaming from the Sun and interacting with Earth's magnetic field, is best seen in the more remote areas of Scotland or Northern England. Seeing them in other parts of the UK, is exceptionally rare.



The Northern Lights as seen from the Wetlands (photograph by Hannah McGivern).

One of our volunteers was on the Wetlands on the evening in question and captured an amazing image while looking out across the Island Lake, towards Beacon Fell. The image was picked up by local and national press (<https://www.independent.co.uk/weather/northern-lights-tonight-uk-aurora-borealis-b2506609.html>).

### *Fylde Rangers Visit*

In late February, a small team from the Fylde Ranger Service returned to the Wetlands to collect some of the willow that our volunteers had bundled up during one of our winter volunteer days. They also cut some ash, to make stakes, and planned to use both the willow and ash to create a series of raised beds. Along with a group of their own enthusiastic volunteers, the Rangers created their first, fully sustainable, raised bed in the early weeks of April. The results of their efforts can be seen in the image below and this represents yet another novel way of recycling invasive willow removed from the Wetlands.



The Community Raised Bed, Hope Street Community Park, Lytham St. Annes (Photograph courtesy of the Fylde Ranger Service).

### *Summer Events*

We currently have no volunteer days scheduled for the summer months. However, work still needs to be done to keep the viewing screens and the footpaths clear. Registered volunteers

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will be emailed when specific help is needed, perhaps for just a couple of hours in the evenings.

As always, the Trust will have stalls at upcoming local community events – Grimsargh Field Day on Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> June and Longridge Show on Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> July. As always, volunteers are more than welcome to come along and help out with our stalls. These events represent a wonderful opportunity for anyone to find out more about the Wetlands and the work of Grimsargh Wetlands Trust. So, if you are there, do come along and say hello. Another date for your diary is Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> August when we will be holding a ‘Bug Hunt’ event on the Wetlands. Further details will appear, in due course, on our website.

### *Legacy Planning*

Many people choose to leave a gift, to a charity of their choice, in their Will. A legacy to Grimsargh Wetlands Trust will provide a lasting gift, helping to safeguard the future of Grimsargh Wetlands and ensuring that generations to come will continue to enjoy our wonderful nature reserve. Relentless urbanisation only makes the Wetlands an even more precious haven for both wildlife and members of the local community. The work of Grimsargh Wetlands Trust is crucial in ensuring that this wonderful community asset remains for years to come. We have many ambitious and exciting ideas for future projects and legacy income can provide us with the funds to develop these projects.

Please consider leaving something to Grimsargh Wetlands Trust when you write, or update, your Will. Celebrating and commemorating the life of a loved one, with a gift in their memory, is also a fitting tribute that helps support our work for Grimsargh Wetlands. We’re always incredibly grateful to receive donations large or small. Thank you.

### *A Reminder – Visiting the Wetlands*

If you intend to visit the Wetlands on your own, we have an access point (‘what3words’ location - *newsstand.lunch.bucked*), from Preston Road, just across from Oban Court, leading to the Compound viewing screens. We also have an access point to the public footpath, that bisects the Wetlands, via the ginnel from Preston Road, just opposite Elston Lane (what3words – *organist.stirs.bonfires*). Finally, there is an access point from Preston Road, just by the new pedestrian crossing point opposite the Elston Park Development (what3words - *doted.budding.gravitate*). This access point leads to the Fen viewing screen.

We do ask that visitors only use these designated public access points. The public footpath across the Wetlands is very popular with dog-walkers and we ask that dogs are kept on leads at all times.

### *Membership information*

Membership information is available on our website. If you need to update your contact details or have any other queries about membership then you should contact Trust Secretary, Jayne Woollam ([jaynewoollam@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:jaynewoollam@hotmail.co.uk)). Any general queries about the work of the Trust should be sent to [grimsarghwetlandstrust@gmail.com](mailto:grimsarghwetlandstrust@gmail.com).

### *Acknowledgements*

We thank Mark Breaks, Louise Greenwood, Hannah McGivern, Lesley Walker, Jayne Woollam and the Fylde Ranger Service for allowing the use of their photographs. We are grateful to the Lancashire Environmental Fund for their generous financial support. A full list of our local sponsors can be found on our website. The Grimsargh Wetlands Trust is a registered charity N° 1174037.

**LANCASHIRE ENVIRONMENTAL FUND**